1-1-2003

The rise and fall of Center Street, 1945-1972

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The rise and fall of Center Street, 1945-1972

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

Program of Study Committee:
R. Douglas Hurt (Major Professor)
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2003

Graduate College
Iowa State University

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Introduction

On November 4, 2002, ten African Americans met at the State Historical Building of Iowa, located in Des Moines, to discuss Center Street. The discussion called Return to Center Street Oral History Project, beckon those who remembered Center Street to tell and share their stories. Jack Lufkin, curator of the museum, and I recorded two hours of conversation on cassette tape.

Most of the stories centered on the period from 1945-1970. Two important themes ran through most of the discussion. First, Center Street had special meaning, because it offered all the important necessities of a neighborhood, good food, music, family, and friends. Second, the city took Center Street from them. There was anger and bitterness about what had happened to their street. This study looks at why African Americans held the street so dear to their hearts, and it looks at the causes for the final demise of Center Street.

In order to understand the importance of Center Street, Chapter One goes back to the beginnings of the street for a brief history of the African American business district. Knowing how and why Center Street grew and the circumstances surrounding segregation in Des Moines gives some insight into why the street was so important to the African Americans that lived along it.

Chapter Two presents Center Street at its zenith. From 1945-1960, events of the world and segregation helped make Center Street an important part of the daily life of not only the people who lived in the neighborhood but also many of the African Americans who visited Des Moines.

The next two chapters deal with the final years of Center Street. Construction of the freeway through Des Moines and plans for the north-south freeway make up Chapter Three. Many neighborhoods in Des Moines felt the brunt of freeway construction, but Center Street residents had fewer options. African Americans due to redlining had little choice but to move into other black areas. Chapter Three follows the attempts by social organizations to help those displaced by the interstate, and then follows the saga of the north-south freeway, which threatened to move some individuals for the fourth time in ten years. Chapter Four, details the effects of the River Hills project and the Oakridge Urban Renewal project on Center Street. The Oakridge Urban Renewal project angered African Americans. By the time it arrived in 1966, many African Americans had relocated twice, once due to the freeway and then by the first urban renewal project in Des Moines, River Hills. Furthermore, those who lived or worked on Center Street were not about to go without a fight.

The Conclusion explains why African Americans are angry at the outcome of freeway construction and urban renewal. By explaining why Center Street was so important to them and how the system of buying property for the freeway and urban renewal worked, it makes it easier to understand why so many are so angry.

Thirty-three years have passed since the bulldozers came down Center Street. However, many of those directly affected by the closing of the street are still mad. By understanding why African Americans feel that way hopefully we can do a better job in the future and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The Rise of Center Street: 1900-1945

When Gabriel Victor Cools arrived in Des Moines, in 1917, he saw an African American business district blossoming on Center Street. Victor Cools was a student from the University of Iowa, a New Yorker, and an African American. For his master's degree, he was studying the development of Negro communities in Iowa. He arrived to see the hustle and bustle of a thriving black community. A community recently bolstered by the appearance of the Black Officers Training Camp located at Fort Des Moines. Cools also discovered an African American business district that had existed for more than ten years. Inspired by the leadership of John Thompson, editor of the Iowa Bystander and Robert N. Hyde a successful local entrepreneur and the vision of the National Negro Business League, local African American enterprises began to grow on Center Street by 1907. African American migrants from the South, who were accustomed to dealing with black owned stores, also helped the business district grow. However, due to segregation African Americans could not expand outside of the black neighborhoods. Yet, growth on Center Street continued until it reached a peak during World War II.[1]

Center Street existed on the northwest edge of downtown Des Moines. The location of the African American district appeared ideal, and even in Cools's day the locality seemed good for an African American enclave. However, early historians pointed out that the

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[1] Gabriel Victor Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1918). For more on the Black Officers Training Camp see Bill Silag, Hal Chase, and Susan Koch-Bridgford, ed., Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000 (Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001), 106-14, 191-92. For more on the early days of Center Street see, Jack Lufkin "Black Des Moines: A Study of Select Negro Social Organizations in Des Moines, Iowa, 1890-1930," (master's thesis, Iowa State University 1980), 38-39. For another outline of early Center Street see, Verda Williams, 1985, manuscript, pg. 8, correspondence folder, Iowa State University Library Archive.

vicinity seemed prone to flooding. Originally called "Bird's Run" or "Calamity Creek," the neighborhood flooded regularly. By 1895, the city had constructed a main drainage sewer that tamed the creek and improved the area.[2]

When Cools entered Center Street in 1917, Calamity Creek had disappeared, and in its place flourished a business district. Yet, Cools seemed unimpressed by the quality of businesses on the street. He listed several enterprises, including restaurants, poolrooms, grocery stores, and barber shops. In all of Des Moines, he listed over fifty-six African American business establishments located on both the east and west side of the city. However, most of these ventures were located in homes. The R. L. Polk City Directory from 1917, only lists five businesses on Center, and all of them were in the 1000 block of Center Street. Most of the entrepreneurs had home based businesses. According to African American businessmen and former Center Street resident Hobart DePatten, as late as the 1960s black entrepreneurs operated small businesses out of houses located on Center Street and the surrounding area. This probably accounts for Cools's negative assessment of the African American business district in Des Moines. Another possibility for Cools's oversight came from the inspiration for his study. Cools's designed his thesis, The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa, after W.E.B. Du Bois's 1899 book, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. Many of the categories, subcategories, and assessments of Cools's thesis originated in the earlier work of Du Bois. In fact Du Bois's cool comments towards African American entrepreneurs, his breakdown of employment by type, his section on health, and his reflections on the causes of tuberculosis due to closed windows, and lack of fresh air all appear in Cools's thesis. Furthermore, Du Bois was the anti thesis to Booker T. Washington.

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[2] Ilda M. Hammer, The Book of Des Moines (Des Moines: Board of Education, 1947), 78-79.

Center Street under the leadership of Thompson and the Negro Business League certainly reflected the ideas of Washington, which explains Cools's assessment of the area.[3]

According to Cools's thesis, he visited the first business on tenth and Center and entered Cut Rate Drug. Cools reported that a graduate of the University of Iowa owned the pharmacy. Highly critical of most of the businesses located on Center Street, Cools had high praise for the pharmacist. Cools remarked, "His soda water fountain in spite of the winter season was doing a flourishing business.... He was fairly on his way to sound prosperity, and this was reflected in his home. He completed recently a stucco house which was reported to be the most valuable Negro home in Des Moines."[4]

Furthermore, Cools noted that restaurants made up the largest number of businesses in Des Moines black neighborhoods. However, Cools described them unflatteringly. He admitted that of the twelve eateries only two were worthy of the title of restaurants, and even they were questionable. It is unlikely that any of the businesses were anything more than rooming house based enterprises. The R. L. Polk City Directory lists no restaurants on Center Street in 1917. Furthermore, it is likely that some of the eateries were actually boarding houses. Since African Americans could not stay in white hotels, they stayed in boarding houses located in black neighborhoods. These establishments often were large houses, and they offered down home cooking as well as lodgings.[5]

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[3] Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," 25; R. L. Polk City Directory, (Des Moines: R. L. Polk, 1917), 1304; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, tape recording, State Historical Center of Iowa; W. E. B. Du Bois, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1899).

[4] Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," 29; R. L. Polk City Directory, 1304.

[5] Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," 25-26; R. L. Polk City Directory, 1304. For more information on African American businesses in Des Moines see, Lufkin, "Black Des Moines," See also Silag, Outside In, 191-92.

Cools found more than African American businesses in Des Moines. He also found segregation. According to Cools, Des Moines formally was an "open town." Cools described an "open town" as a town that allowed African Americans the freedom to chose where they lived. However, Cools pointed out, "A southerner is responsible for the changed condition. It is claimed that he arrived on the scene about a decade ago, got interested in real estate, and immediately began his segregation propaganda. To supplement his sinister activities he enlisted the assistance of outside agencies who, in a series of public utterances, advocated residential segregation." Cools further stated, "From that time on, Des Moines ceased to be an "open town".[6]

Unfortunately, Cools gave no evidence, or even a name. However, Hobart DePatten, longtime Des Moines resident and African American businessman recalled that Des Moines had been an "open town." According to DePatten, a large number of southern blacks, and whites migrated to Iowa during the World War I era. He believed that the southern whites brought "Jim Crow" with them. Of course, DePatten, born in the 1920's, could only recall the stories that he had heard from his father Robert Patton, the local printer on Center Street.[7]

In contrast to both Cools and DePatten, most contemporary historians believe that segregation started in the North before the Civil War. Many of the bigger cities with larger populations of African Americans segregated these groups as well as newly arriving immigrants. After the Civil War, the South constructed various black codes designed similar to segregation practices in the North. However, northern States like Iowa, with small populations of African Americans passed laws protecting the civil rights of blacks as well as

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[6] Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," 11.

[7] E. Hobart DePatten, interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, Iowa, 29 October 2001.

negro suffrage. According to Leland Sage, a prominent Iowa Historian, the African American population in the state of Iowa remained near 1 percent until the 1970s. This small population helped the Republican led state government approve negro suffrage in 1868 and the Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1875. Yet, the state of Iowa rarely enforced the civil rights bill. However, in Des Moines the population of African Americans rose dramatically enough from 1910 to 1920 that real estate agents felt the need to redline certain areas in Des Moines. According to historian Jack Lufkin, real-estate agents in Des Moines feared that African American occupation of rentals drove down the resale value of the property and forced out white neighbors. This in turn led to the eventual redlining of Des Moines. Nonetheless, regardless of the way segregation came to Des Moines, segregation created Center Street.[8]

The population growth of African Americans was not unique to Des Moines. Many urban areas of the North increased in population due to the lack of jobs in the under industrialized South. In addition, due to World War I and the large number of white workers employed by the armed forces, more jobs opened up in the industrial North that normally went to European Americans. Furthermore, the increase in lynching and the more severe form of Jim Crow practiced in the South drove blacks north. All of these forces pushed or pulled African Americans, as Amiri Baraka said in Blues People, across the "new Jordan," and to the new "Promised Land." Another reason for the growth of the African American population in Des Moines was due to the closing of small mining towns, such as the African American coal town Buxton Iowa. Many Buxtonites moved north to Des Moines.

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[8] Leland L. Sage, A History of Iowa (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 180-81; Lufkin, "Black Des Moines," 3. For more on pre-and post-Civil War and Iowa segregation see, Robert Dykstra, Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). For more on segregation on a national scale see, John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 436, 454, 481; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).

Entrepreneur printer Robert Patton moved his business from Buxton to Center Street. Unfortunately, these newly arriving African Americans found redlining and segregation.[9]

Segregation in the armed forces also played an important part in the growth of Center Street. The United States at the turn of the century had a segregated army. In response to World War I, many African American leaders demanded an officers training camp for blacks in the army. The government chose Fort Des Moines due to its northern location and its prior housing of the 127 soldiers of the all black twenty-fifth infantry unit in 1903. In 1917, The Black Officers Training Camp came to Fort Des Moines. Additionally, the army trained African American enlisted men at Camp Dodge, located north of Des Moines. This large influx of African American men brought civic pride to the black business district, and, in the case of the Black Officer Training Camp, much needed business to Center Street entrepreneurs. In fact, the Iowa Bystander printed the photos and told the stories of several young black officers including future editor J. B. Morris. However, the paper was also equally proud of the enlisted men at Camp Dodge. Thompson reported the building of barracks for the new recruits, and he wrote stories about the incoming African Americans troops to Des Moines. By October of 1917, 639 African Americans attained commissions at Fort Des Moines. Later that year, Thompson published a book, History and Views of the Colored Officers Training Camp, which he advertised frequently in the Bystander.[10]

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[9] Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 471-75; LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 95, 97; Silag, Outside In, 305.

[10] Silag, Outside In, 104-14, 289-90; Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 17 May 1918, 30 November 1917. For more on the Black Officers Training Camp see, J. L. Thompson, History and Views of the Colored Officers Training Camp (Des Moines: Iowa Bystander, 1917). For a description of the battle to create the black officers camp see, Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 455-57.

Center Street continued to grow. By the summer of 1919, the Crocker Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) began organizing. Affectionately know years later as the Crocker Y, its start was a slow process. A year of hard work led to the first annual report by the executive secretary of the Crocker Street YMCA. The finance committee reported a balance of $1,165.64. The building committee reported the laying of the cornerstone of their new building at Twelfth and Crocker. Years later they built the new Crocker Y at 1333 Keosauqua Way, which stood there until freeway construction demolished the building in 1959.[11]

Nightlife was also very popular in the African American community. In 1919, the neighborhood came to the annual spring ball at Dreamland Hall. The Dreamland located at Twelfth and Crocker featured "music by Dysart's Syncopated Jazz Orchestra." The poster printed by Center Street businessman Robert Patten proudly advertised "Let Patten Print It."[12]

After World War I, more improvements came to the Center Street area. On January 26, 1920, construction began on Keosauqua Way (Keo Way). On the site of the former "Birds Run," the city began construction on a new highway. Plans for the road had originally emerged in 1885, ten years before the city controlled the flood plain with a sewer system. Now thirty-four years later the road became a reality. City planners designed the highway to alleviate traffic from the downtown area and route it towards the newer subdivisions on the northwest side of town. The plan called for the road to eventually lead to the city of Urbandale. According to a 1919 Des Moines Park Department report, Keo Way met with

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[11] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 25 June 1920.
[12] Poster, Robert E. Patten Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

much opposition. Home and business owners had "many meetings of protest, petitions of objections and court injunctions, such as are the usual accompaniment of initial improvements of this kind," the planners accounted. However, later in the report the Park Department official stated, "property values are already responding to the benefit of the improvement and it is now impossible to secure any property abutting on Keosauqua Way for less than double its price three to five years ago."[13]

The effect on Center Street was quite dramatic. The north side of 1000 block of Center disappeared due to the road construction. However, businesses located on the South side of the street survived. The sweep of Keo Way created a small island between Center and Keo, which for years became the prime-parking place across the street from the Sepia Club. By August of 1920, a Tribune journalist stated that property values along Keo had increased dramatically According to the reporter, a property on Ninth and Center, which had listed for $14,000 before the construction of Keo Way had now increased to $42,000. Moreover, a business property in the heart of the African American district on Twelfth and Center that had sold for $9,000 dollars had now a value of $25,000. However, the Bystander during the same period did not report on the construction of Keo Way.[14]

The editors of the Bystander were not interested in the partial destruction of the business district because an editorial change had happened at the paper. On November 1, 1919, John L. Thompson sold the paper, first to his secretary Mrs. Emerald Marsh and then to Professor Laurence Jones from Piney Woods School in Mississippi. Professor Jones wanted to use the paper as a learning tool for his students. That explains why the paper

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[13] Des Moines Tribune, 26 January 1920; Park Department, Annual Report of the Park Department (Des Moines: City of Des Moines, 1919), 30-32.

[14] Des Moines Tribune, 6 August 1920; Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 1 June 1920, 30 August 1920.

concentrated on national issues and very few local issues during his tenure. The paper's popularity and sales began to sag until bought back by Thompson who sold it to his protégée James B. Morris.[15]

What is evident from both the City Directory and fire insurance maps is that by 1920 the business district experienced a boom. Furthermore, many of the structures of the 1920s would survive into the 1960s. By 1920 Center Street had blossomed. Fire insurance maps from 1920 show several business located on the street. This is in sharp contrast to maps from 1901 that show a stable, a barbershop, a bakery, and Webster Hall. The city also renumbered the side streets. Oak Street disappeared and became Ten Street, while Eleventh Street turn into Twelfth. Furthermore, the R. L. Polk City Directory shows more businesses on Center Street in 1920 then those listed in 1917. Including Cut Rate Drug, Center Street Express, Hotel Laundry Company, Center Dress Club, Urbandale Coal Company, Grund Cash Grocery, and Ungles Pie Company. Also found in the 1920 City Directory were several properties that would survive into the 1960s, the Mason Hall, Ungles Bakery, the Saur Apartments and the Virginia Apartments.[16]

By 1921, The Shelburn Gardens and the Lincoln Theater appeared in the Bystander. This complex located at 790 Twelfth Street would eventually become the Billiken Ballroom. The Shelburn Gardens advertised rental rates of twenty dollars a night for the public, and ten dollars a night for private parties. Manager, James Wood promoted his own Thursday night dance featuring the Peerless Melody Band, while enticing patrons with the catch phrase,

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[15] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 1 November 1919, 1 June 1920, 30 August 1920; Silag, Outside In, 289-90.

[16] Map of Center Street, 1902 and 1920, Fire Insurance Maps, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines; R. L. Polk City Directory, (Des Moines: R. L. Polk, 1920), 1398-99.

"Shelburn Gardens is as cool as the Parks." Furthermore, by August of 1921 the Lincoln Theater reopened on Twelfth Street with the promise that they would be more responsive to the customers needs.[17]

By 1922, the Shelburn Gardens was in full swing, and late in the year they held an armistice dance. Even though the war had been over for three years, the people at the future Billiken had plenty to celebrate. They had a "big carnival and balloon dance" with "hats, horns, balloons, and confetti." Also during that year the Dysart band worked in the same building on Twelfth and Center called the Garden Café playing for the restaurant's masquerade ball.[18]

The black church also played an important role in the community. During the 1920s it held many events and get-togethers to attract new members, and to provide an alternative to the growing blues and jazz culture. St. Paul AME offered a county fair during the winter of 1921. The show featured live music from the Community Service Band, and the phenomenal talents of seven year old "trap drummer" Melvin Saunders. The next year St. Paul AME showed the film The Poison Pool. The advertisements enticed viewers by pronouncing, "you can't afford to miss this picture, come see the good that may come out of this Poison Pool of the mixture of the races."[19]

However, by the Great Depression times had grown hard. Des Moines's African American population dropped. According to Census records, between 1920, and 1930 the number of African Americans in Polk County declined from 5,837, to 5,713. While the total number lost (124) seemed insignificant, it conflicted with the usual growth that had occurred

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[17] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), August 1921.
[18] Poster, Robert E. Patten Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.
[19] Ibid.

in previous years. Typically, Polk County's African American populace grew by approximately 1,000 individuals per decade between 1890, and 1990.[20]

A 1939 Tribune study by Drake sociology professor, Alfred Severson, and Lillian Edmunds, of the Negro Community Center, tried to answer the question regarding the decline of the African American community in Des Moines. Using statistics from the 1934 real property inventory, the Negro Occupational Survey, and the U. S. Census, the duo discovered that the loss in population was due to African American males leaving Des Moines to find work in other cities. According to the survey, they found that in 1920 there were 105 males to every 100 women. By 1930, the number of males to females dropped to 95, and continued to decline so that by 1935 only 90 males were accountable for each 100 females. According to the authors, the drop in the number of males was indicative of African American men moving to more favorable opportunities in larger cities. They also stated that the number was not due to an increase in the number of women. Severson and Edmunds pointed out that the number of females remained constant during those fifteen years.[21]

The Great Depression also increased racism in Des Moines. Before the 1930s, Des Moines had a reputation as a progressive town regarding race. In 1907, the Des Moines City Council with the help of the Des Moines chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had successfully kept the play The Clansman from performing in Des Moines. Furthermore, by 1916, the city and the NAACP tried to keep the movie Birth of a Nation from playing in Des Moines. Even though the city failed to keep the movie from showing, city officials had created enough negative attention that the

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[20] Silag, Outside In, 41.
[21] Des Moines Tribune, 2 Jan 1939.

movie closed early due to lack of sales. However, by the middle 1930s, city and state officials began to see African Americans as the cause of economic blight in Des Moines.[22]

A 1935 Report on Housing, by the Iowa State Planning Board, showed how much the city of Des Moines had changed regarding African Americans. Put together by "many departments and institutions of the State of Iowa and support of F.E.R.A. Officials," the document blamed African Americans for destroying neighborhoods by concentrating their growth in several areas of Des Moines. Ironically, the document initially reported that the African American population was small enough that if dispersed among the whole city it would not be a problem for Des Moines. However, "Negroes have tended to concentrate in certain areas where their presence has had decidedly detrimental effects upon the general tone of the community, and more important upon property value and rent returns." Then using maps showing the African American population clusters in the Center Street and Walker Street area, (east side near the State Capitol and University), the report tried to show how blight and black populations go hand in hand and how the movement of African Americans into the fringe areas spread decline into white neighborhoods. The document continued, "the movements of Negro populations are insidious in that they take place over a number of years and the process of degeneration in the community is not realized until too late." The solution to the State Planning Board was to build low-cost housing. "Through low-cost housing, the Negroes could be confined to more definite areas where they would have much less damaging effect upon the desirability of the property surrounding." The plan helped to enforce the real estate community use of redlining. Yet, even with the fences of

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[22] Lufkin, " Black Des Moines," 126-29.

segregation surrounding the neighborhood, Center Street was about to enter it's greatest decade.[23]

The Billiken, the Watkins Hotel and the Sepia reached their apex in the 1940s. Robert Patten the local printer produced literally thousands of handbills, and posters advertising various shows coming to the clubs. Each of the nightclubs had their own house band. At the Watkins, it was often Orville Cox and his Keo Knights, at the Sepia, it was the Gray Brothers Orchestra, and at the Billiken, it was Speck Redd and the Lads. However, it was common for bands to play at other venues. For instance, the Gray Brothers who bought the Sepia in 1943 often played for the youth council of the NAACP. In December of 1945, they performed with legendary pianist Irene Myles at the Central YMCA for the youth council, and then again in the spring of 1946 at the Birdland Marina shelter. The Gray's Sepia Club also had floorshows. On February 26, 1946, The Gray Brothers advertised a "complete new review floor show" the show featured Pedro Lane and had two shows nightly. Apparently, Lane's show did not go over well with the Sepia crowd, two weeks later a new poster came out. "Hunt and Lane present a complete change of show beginning Wednesday March 6, 1946."[24]

The Watkins Hotel also offered entertainment during the 1940s. Orville Cox had the house band at the Watkins. Cox performed on Christmas of 1944. Promoted as "Get hep to the jive and spend Xmas Day right" Cox also was the leader of the band when legendary

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[23] Iowa State Planning Board, Report on Housing (Des Moines, Ia: City of Des Moines, 1935). The map, and the text of the document also appear in, Gaynelle Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie! (Des Moines: Iowa Bystander Co., 1996), 36. Narcisse changed the title of the document to Analysis of the Colored Population in Des Moines: An Official City Study on the Detrimental Effects of Negroes on Des Moines, however, the text is the same and comes from the planning board document.

[24] Posters, Robert E. Patten Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

local performer Bobby Parker returned from the war in 1946. According to Parker, he was able to get a job when the house drummer refused to play. However, locals were not the only musicians at the Watkins. Chicago blues singer Ronald Coleman appeared at the Watkins from May 24 to 26 of 1946, advertised as "Blues, Blues, Blues, Chicago's greatest blues singer Ronald Coleman."[25]

The Billiken perhaps had the greatest reputation of the three. Nightly jam sessions ran until the early morning hours. Speck Redd led the way with his orchestra. In fact, the jam session had many posters and handouts printed advertising the show. The Billiken invited all musicians to attend. Even bands from other clubs participated in the jams. "Big jams every Saturday Nite." Advertised one Patten poster, "midnite till dawn, music by Speck Redd and the lads, and Cox's Keo Nite Club Band." The jam was so popular that even regional bands hosted the show. The Kansas City Play Boys advertised as "5 tons of rhythm" led the July 3, 1942 show. The Billiken also offered entertainment on the holidays. On Christmas Eve of 1942, Irene Myles performed White Christmas, and music lovers were encouraged to come to the "Christmas Morning Dawn Dance. On New Years Eve of that same year, the owners of the Billiken advertised their "New Year's Eve Carnival Cabaret Dance." Open from 10:00 P.M. until the morning, the club owners encouraged patrons to "dance the old year out."[26]

The Billiken kept Speck Redd busy during the war years. Every Saturday night Redd and his orchestra played the Saturday Nite Defense Club Carnival Breakfast. However, the

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[25]Ibid.; Silag Outside In, 532. Patten's poster calls Cox, Orville, while author Raymond Weikal calls him Oliver Cox. Furthermore, Patten's poster calls the former Shelburn Gardens, the Billiken, while Weikal and Narcisse spell it Bilikin.

[26] Poster, Robert E. Patten Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

show truly started on Sunday Morning at 1:30 A.M! When the war was over Redd also played at the special Armistice Dance at the Billiken.[27]

Also adding to the nightlife of Center Street during the war years were the African American WACS. Fort Des Moines, the home during World War I of the Black Officers Training Camp, was the base of the Woman's Auxiliary Army Corps (WACS). The WACS originally excluded blacks, but added African American women to the group after complaints from the NAACP. The black WACS came to Center Street for their entertainment. Furthermore, the Watkins Hotel was also an U. S. O. staging point for African American soldiers. The large number of single men and women added to the excitement of Center Street. In 1942, Lincoln Post Number 126, located on Eleventh Street just off Center had its holiday party for soldiers and WACS. It advertised "Come out and met your friends, the soldiers and WACs during the holidays relax, play games, eat each evening."[28]

Churches also gave entertainment options for the locals during the war. Mt. Olive Baptist Church located on the eastside invited Center Street members to their Labor Day picnic in 1942. "Real barbeque ribs, and meats prepared by the two barbeque kings: Deacons Felix Steward and Morris Roberson. Plenty of fried fish, chicken; ice cream cake and other refreshments." Furthermore, to make sure everyone knew where to go the church listed the city buses to take and where to transfer to get to the party.[29]

The Corinthian Baptist Church located near Center on Ninth and School also had diversions for the faithful. They offered gospel concerts. During the month of October 1942,

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.; Silag, Outside In, 121-23.
[29] Poster, Robert E. Patten Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

they offered the "voices of 50 young people in mass chorus," and at the end of the month they featured the "WMT Radio Gospel Tour."[30]

Between 1907 and 1950 Center Street flourished. The African American neighborhood that started modestly along the banks of Calamity Creek grew into a large and popular destination for African Americans in Iowa. Furthermore, the arrival of the Black Officers Training Camp of World War I and the WAC's of World War II, helped the district grow. However, the popularity of the street did not change the fact that its very existence was due to segregation. The redlining in the 1910s by real estate agents and the segregation policies of the state in the 1930s helped to create the strong black neighborhood. Yet, with the advent of the 1950s Center Street still had one more decade of glory to come.[31]

[30] Ibid.

Center Street Reigns: 1945-1960

Center Street amazed Ted Ewing. Ewing, a black GI, arriving in Des Moines during World War II, saw Center Street as a wild three-ring circus. "We hit Center Street; it fascinated me with all those WACs in Town. I had never seen so many women in one place before as that time on Center Street." Yet, it was not only women that caught the eye of Ewing, "every house I went to had a crap game, vendor, whiskey and women." For an African American GI this was a dream come true. Furthermore, it amazed Ewing that Des Moines looked like an integrated city. "I was delighted to see Black and white holding hands...with Blacks doing professional work I did not see in St. Louis. Blacks and whites were going to see the same movies, eating in restaurants - - this amazed me, and I fell in love with Des Moines, Iowa." However, Mildred Mayberry said it best, "the famous Center Street. It was known far and wide through the North, South, East, and West as the 'Greatest 24-hour City.' People came from all over to see and be a part of Center Street in Des Moines, Iowa."[1]

Ewing coming from the South may have been amazed at what he saw, but Jim Crow still operated in Des Moines. However, Center Street was important to the African American community because it provided a place of their own. Forced to create their own entertainment and social establishments due to Jim Crow and segregation, African Americans created Center Street. Center Street provided the black community its economic and social

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[1] Gaynelle Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie! (Des Moines: Bystander Publishing, 1996), 3, 16.

needs. However, it also provided them a sense of place and civic pride from the end of World War II through the mid 1960s.

The Center Street district from 1950 to 1969 started at the corner of Keosauqua Way (Keo Way) and the 1000 block of Center, and reached all the way up to Fifteenth and Center. Furthermore, the side street of Twelfth also offered diversions. In fact, Twelfth and Center probably rivaled Kansas City's Twelfth Street and Vine as the most popular destination in the city. The mighty Billiken Ballroom located at 790 Twelfth Street and the Elks Club across the street was within close walking distance to the beloved Sepia Club. The Sepia was located just a short block to the east and on the south side of the street at 1014 Center. Moreover, walking to the east of the Sepia Club was the Masonic Hall, and for the hungry, the famous Ida Bell's, later known as the Snack Shack, was open to fill your needs. Next to Ida Bell's stood the Billiard Parlor, with pool sharks ready to entice you into a game of pool and to take a few of your dollars. Continuing to the east you would find the Hardaway Tonsorial Parlor and Barber one of many barber shops on the strip, another bar called The Nip and Bridgman Drug which, later became Metropolitan Drug, and finally a series a restaurants in the 1960s.[2]

Heading west from the Sepia Club you would find the 1100 block of Center Street with business located on both sides of the road. Harry Hatter's, home of the chili known to cure hangovers, was located at 1100 Center. The Buzz Inn and the Eleven Twelve Vets Club occupied Harry Hatters in the 1960s. Continuing west was Hobart DePatten's Launderette and Grill, which later became the site of his own club, Big D's Lounge. Nu Way Cleaners

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[2] R. L. Polk City Directory, (Kansas City: R. L. Polk, 1950-70); Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 17. This is a composite sketch containing businesses that existed at differing times on Center Street between 1950-1966.

operated next to DePatten's shop. By late 1950s it had closed, and Metropol Smokes replaced it. Another smoke shop next to DePatten, Truehart Smoke Shop, closed after one year and became the Community Lunch in 1960. Beulah Dixon at 1112 Center ran a Bar. Eventually it became the Peak A Boo Inn and was the original home of the Eleven Twelve Club, but after 1961 the building was abandoned. If it was time to shine your shoes, the next shop was for you. Located at 1114 Center was the long time home of Will Steger. Steger operated the business, and he lived in an attached apartment. In 1962, Deluxe Shine would move into his spot. Across Twelfth Street was the location of Bell and Hobart, the local pharmacy and the Community Luncheonette. The Community Luncheonette, previously known as Trotters, was famous for its pies and desserts. By the 1960s several entrepreneurs would try to replace the famous Trotters, but few succeeded. Finally, two more hair stylists finished out that side of the street, the Gray Brothers Barbershop and Evalon Beauty Shop. Eventually Mort's Barber Shop and Berline Beauty replaced the Gray Brothers and Evalon's salon when they moved across the street. In 1964, Mildred's Beauty Salon would replace Berline. Bell and Hobart's, Trotter's, and the Gray Brothers Barber Shop were all part of a larger building that also housed the Billiken Ballroom on Twelfth Street.[3]

Crossing the street from Mildred's Beauty Salon, you would find the New Evalon Beauty Shop until 1967. By heading back down the south side of the street towards

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[3] R. L. Polk City Directory; Mel Harper, personal interview with the author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 11 November 2002.

downtown you would find the original home of the Deluxe Shine located on the Corner of Twelfth and Center.[4]

The bulk of the African American business district between the mid-1940s, and late 1960s fit into little more than a three-block area between Tenth and Twelfth Place on Center. However, moving west up the hill some businessmen had invested in other properties. Ungles Bakery was on the south side of the street between Thirteenth and Fourteenth on Center. Brotherhood Incorporated built one of the last buildings on the street at 1301 Center in 1959. The corner of Fourteenth and Center was the location of the Crescent School of Beauty and Jamie's Grill. It also was the location of the Virginia Apartments, later bought by Hobart Depatten in 1965.[5]

At its peak, Center Street was a whirlwind of activity. Both the Billiken Ballroom and the Sepia Club shared top billing as the hot spots of the city. It was a common sight to see young couples strolling from the Billiken on Twelfth to the Sepia on Center. In fact, watching the well-dressed couples was a favorite pastime of families parked in the street. Street venders sold hot tamales, while both strollers and watchers mingled on the sidewalk. Parents who could no longer dance in the clubs brought their children and parked on the street to talk to their friends. In fact, the most prized parking space may have been the island between Center and Keo, which was conveniently located in front of the Sepia Club. Pete Daniels recalled, "Some Saturday nights when my wife and I couldn't get anyone to watch the kids, we would all pile in my green Dodge and head for Center Street." Daniels

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[4] R. L. Polk City Directory; For more on Center Street business district see, Bill Silag, Hal Chase, and Susan Koch-Bridgford, ed., Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000 (Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001), 191-215.

[5] R. L. Polk City Directory.

continued, "We would buy chips and pop for the kids. I would put beer in my cooler and we would head for the parking lot across from the Sepia. We would people-watch. All kinds of families would park there or other spots and just watch the people."[6]

Musicians also prowled the streets at night. Gene Jackson drummer for the Soul Brothers, and many other bands recalled, "the clubs were always jammed and people would go from club to club. When we got a break we would walk into a club and watch other entertainers." Even the police allowed spectators to watch the crowds. However, as Bob White remembered the police only allowed you to sit in your car, and not on the bumper.[7]

Those who sat in their cars watching the beautifully dressed couples enter the Sepia Club across the street were able to listen to some of the best music of the 1940s, and 1950s. Howard and Seymour Gray owned the Sepia Club. Before them, the Sepia Club had been the Harlem Club of Polk County; W. H. Purcell was the president of the organization. According to the articles of incorporation, the board members of the Harlem Club wanted to provide a private social establishment for African Americans. White nightclubs in Des Moines discriminated against African Americans, so the Harlem Club filled an entertainment need. The Harlem Club Board incorporated the dance club in 1939. In 1943, Howard and Seymour Gray took over the nightclub and named it the Sepia Club.[8]

By 1944, the Grey brothers had made the Sepia Club into one of Des Moines prime attractions. The Sepia boasted not only hot music, but also good food created by their sister Gladys Bates (Carter). Mary Clark who worked at the club recalled that it was a nice club

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[6] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 6, 21, 23.

[7] Ibid., 14, 16.

[8] Harlem Club of Iowa Incorporation Records, book 1573, 294, microfilm, Polk county Auditor Records, Polk County Office Building, Des Moines, Ia; Sepia Club Incorporation Records, book 1746, 377, microfilm, Polk County Auditors Office, Polk County Office Building, Des Moines Ia.

with white tablecloths. "Everyone dressed up," and "there was always good food." Clark also remembered that dining at the Sepia was an upscale experience. "When you ate at the Sepia, your food was served in style. The waiters carried white towels on their arms. You could sit and enjoy the fine music, good friends, and there was nothing to compare to it."[9]

By most accounts, nearly all of the greatest African American musicians played at the club. However, the local house band could stand its ground against anyone. Led by Howard Gray on Saxophone, his brother Seymour Gray on Bass, and the legendary Rufus Spats on Alto sax, the Gray Brothers Orchestra was the top band in town. Decked out in the white tuxedos and name-plated bandstands, the Gray brothers had the professional look of any national touring act. It was not uncommon for lines to form outside of the club as eager young couples waited to go inside. Kenneth Whitney recalled that as a player for a traveling football team he and his teammates needed the help of Howard Gray to get into the crowded club. Once inside he found the club filled with WACs (Woman's Auxiliary Army Corps). However, not everyone was so lucky. The Gray Brothers frowned on underage patrons. Eloise McElroy-Bruce remembered that Howard Gray would not let her into the club. Gray told her, "You're not old enough to come in here and I know your dad and mother." Shirley Woods also told about her sisters sneaking into the Sepia Club. According to Shirley, "Seymour Gray called my dad and told him they were inside. Dad went over there and, before everybody, he drug them out; they were so embarrassed." John Long once put on a

[9] Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa; Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 17; Silag, Outside In, 208.

suit and tie to look older, and tried to hide in a corner, but somehow Howard or Seymour Gray found him and threw him out.[10]

Yet, not all young people faced the wrath of the Gray brothers. Gene Jackson started his musical career at the age of sixteen playing with various jazz and blues bands. At the time he was under the drinking age of eighteen. According to Jackson, "when the law would come in; I would jump off stage and go out the back door in a hurry." Gene's younger brother Gary Jackson also sneaked into the clubs. The younger Jackson sometimes snuck through the kitchen of the bar, and hid behind Harlan Thomas, the piano player of the band. Eventually Thomas would allow the younger Jackson to play piano while his big brother played the drums.[11]

Besides keeping a watchful eye on the young players, Howard Gray was also a performer willing to help young musicians get their start. "Chicago" Rick Lussie, a young white guitar player from Chicago first met Howard Gray while both played in an early 1960s band. Lussie who had played on the Southside of Chicago, had come to Drake University to study education. He would eventually graduate, and later became a teacher in the Des Moines Public Schools System. One time during a performance at a white nightspot Gray invited Lussie to play at his bar during their break. Lussie who had no idea that Gray's club was the famous Sepia, recalled that he went to the nightclub and had so much fun that he did

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[10] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 21, 23, 25; Silag, Outside In, 531, 533.

[11] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 14; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa; Harlan Thomas, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 15, November 2002.

not return to finish the earlier gig and continued to play on Center Street until it closed in the late 1960s.[12]

The Gray brothers also hired other great local favorites. One of the most popular piano players in Des Moines was the great Ernest "Speck" Redd. Redd born in 1913 in Columbia, Missouri, came to Iowa in 1943 already established as a talented composer. He composed and arranged music for George Dewey Washington and Earl Hines. Like many musicians fell in love with Des Moines. His popular TV and Radio show called Speck Redd Plays made him famous citywide. The show featured guests who telephoned the show and tried to stump Redd with different song tittles. According to Frances Hawthorne, assistant editor of the Bystander in the late 1950s, "out of 4,000 songs that the inimitable entertainer knows he was only stumped once and that – because the song had the same title as another." However, Speck Redd's fame came from being one of the best piano teachers in the Midwest. His list of pupils that later went on to fame is remarkable. Roger Williams, Louis Bellison, Sam Salamone, and Harlan Thomas all learned piano under Redd's watchful eye. Roger Williams went on to a stellar recording career; recording the hit single Autumn Leaves. Louis Bellison picked up the drums and joined Pearl Bailey's band among many others in his storied career. Sam Salamone stayed in town and played with most of the top jazz and soul bands. He is in the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame and the Iowa Jazz Hall of Fame. Harlan Thomas joined the Soul Brothers, and helped start the Platinum Blues Band and was enshrined in the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame in 1999.[13]

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[12] Rick Lussie, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 14 December 2001.
[13] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 4 October 1958.

Speck Redd also taught classes at night at both Roosevelt and East High School. His interest in helping young people was similar to the way the Gray brothers assisted the community by letting organizations use their nightclub.[14]

The Iota Phi Lambda sorority was just one of the groups that used the club for special occasions. They held their annual fundraiser at the Sepia in 1947. Most of the notable local musicians played the gig including: Speck Redd, Irene Myles, the Gray Brothers Orchestra, and Eddie Eugene.[15]

By 1965, Howard and Seymour Gray closed the Sepia, which reopened under the management of Willard Saunders and Tip Collins. They changed the name of the bar to the Collins Club. However, the Collins Club closed in 1966, and in 1969 demolished due to urban renewal.[16]

The Sepia, however, was not the only spot in town. Located a few blocks away, at 790 Twelfth was the Billiken Theater. Originally, know as the Shelburn Gardens the Billiken opened for business in 1921. Just like the Sepia Club, some of the greatest musicians and performers played at the venue. Perhaps the greatest highlight at the Billiken happen in 1939 when the legendary Josephine Baker performed at the ballroom. Not only national acts played the Billiken but also local musicians performed at the venue. Jimmy Pryor once remarked that he played with the great T-Bone Walker at the club, although according to Pryor, Walker spent more time playing craps than playing guitar.[17]

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Silag, Outside In, 423.

[16] R. L. Polk City Directory; Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 12.

[17] Poster, Robert Patton Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa; Jimmy Pryor personal interview by author, Des Moines, 1999.

The Billiken also offered underage teenagers a place to dance. According to John Long, "We used to go to the junior proms at the Billiken Ballroom. They sold soda pop and we had a great time dancing." Furthermore, the Billiken High School and College Dance Club, started in 1937, which offered young people the opportunity to dance in the grand ballroom. This gave the younger crowd a chance to dance and chaperones kept adults from entering the building during the events.[18]

The ballroom also went through many name changes. The building housed two clubs. The upstairs club called the Paradise Room, or the Empire Room, featured the main ballroom. The downstairs club called the Hole featured a more intimate setting. Mel Harper long time owner of the Hole eventually rented the whole building and called it the 790 Club. Most people had a good experience at the club. Yet, Jacque Jones remembered, "I sure hated to go to the restroom. You had to go down this long hall where guys were always hanging around, and you had to pass by them. You never knew quite what to expect."[19]

Mel Harper first leased the basement of the Billiken in 1956. Harper immediately hired a house band. He built the band first by hiring away Saxman Rufus Spates from the Sepia Club. He added Eddie Eugene and Pres Lovett. Later on other notable locals joined the band like Lincoln Berry on Organ, Curly Morgan on Drums, and Terry Bennet on Guitar. Harper believed that it was important to have a house band. Harper explained changing bands from week to week hurt the fan base of the club because people looked forward to

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[18] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 21; Silag, Outside In, 445.
[19] Harper, personal interview; Narcisse, They Took our Piece of the Pie!, 10.

seeing the same band. He believed that it took several weeks to rebuild an audience once the house band changed.[20]

Perhaps the best booking in Mel Harper's career involved Jimmy "The Midnite Cowboy" Pryor. In 1960, Harper was looking for someone to replace Pee Wee Crayton. He wanted a blues guitarist and singer. Harper called booking agents Rogers and Rogers, from Detroit Michigan. The agents recommended Pryor who had made a name on the Detroit blues scene. Pryor accepted a two-week engagement at the Hole. As Mel Harper put it years later, "I hired him for two weeks, and he [has] been here for forty some years!"[21]

Pryor instantly became a legend on the Center Street strip. With popular local singer Sweet Georgia Brown, he became the most fashionable blues player in Des Moines. Pryor had paid his dues at an early age. He was born in Beckley, West Virginia, in 1916, and by the age of twelve, he was playing piano at cathouses, rent parties, and fish fries. When he was eighteen years old, his brother found him a job in a coalmine. For the next ten years he worked the mines, and played the blues. When World War II began he enlisted in the army and the military assigned him to the Red Ball Express. The Red Ball Express was a famous transportation unit during World War II. African American soldiers made up the entire outfit. Surviving bullets, and bombs, he honed his musical skills playing for fellow soldiers, and USO events. When he returned to the United States, he went back to West Virginia and formed a band called the Four Aces. The band moved to Detroit and instantly Pryor became popular with the local crowd. He played with or opened for John Lee Hooker, Cab

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[20] Harper, personal interview.
[21] Ibid.

Calloway, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. When Mel Harper called Detroit booking agents Roger's and Roger's, Pryor seemed the perfect candidate to play the blues.[22]

From 1956 through 1962, Harper ran the Hole, and occasionally booked the upper Paradise Club with bigger acts, such as Eddie "Cleanhead" Vincent, Louis Jordon, and "T-bone" Walker. These great national acts, complimented by great local talent created a vibrant music scene. Furthermore, what made Center Street attractive to musicians of the time were the Key Clubs.[23]

Before liquor-by-the-drink passed in 1962 and the State enforced the 2:00 A.M. closing of bars and taverns, Des Moines clubs operated on the Key Club system. A bar patron would join a club. This allowed the club member the ability to store his liquor at the bar in a locked box. Only the member had the key to the box. However, in reality the bartender had everyone's key. If you wanted a shot of whiskey and you had only vodka in your box the bartender would open someone else's box that had the whiskey and pour you a drink. The only prohibition on Key Clubs concerned beer. If a club served beer it need to close by two in the morning. Both the Sepia and the Billiken stayed open twenty-four hours. This attracted even more musicians. Harper recalled that when the big acts played Des Moines, many of the African American players flocked to Center Street to join in the jam sessions after 2:00 A.M. Members from Duke Ellington, and Count Basie's band frequently jammed with the locals after their own gigs had finished.[24]

It was also common for the leaders of the bands to spend the night at Speck Redd's house. Redd had known most of the major jazz and blues artists going back to his days as an

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[22] Point Blank (Des Moines), 27 November 2002.
[23] Harper, personal interview.
[24] Ibid.

arranger for Earl Hines. According to Ernest Redd, Speck's son, it was not uncommon to see Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, or Louis Armstrong showing up and jamming all night with his father.[25]

The Sepia and the Billiken were not the only clubs that featured music. The Elks Club also had music. The Elks Lodge was located just south of Center at 785 Twelfth Street. It was across the street from the Billiken Theater. The Elks organized in Des Moines on December 7, 1908. The members of the Elks Lodge bought their property on Twelfth Street in 1943. They spent $13,000 to remodel the building and paid it off by 1948. In addition, the American Legion located on Eleventh Street off Center had music. The Royal Dukes an African American social club held their 1948 Winter Gala at the American Legion Hall. The American Legion, the Elks, and the Royal Dukes were not the only social organizations, or secret societies located in the African American neighborhood. Also found on Center Street were the Masons, the Roosevelt Club, and their female counterparts.[26]

Another popular hang out on Center was Big D's. Hobart DePatten, owner of the launderette on Center, closed his shop due to competition from a white owned laundry located nearby. He reopened as a tavern known as Larks and later Big D's. DePatten hired local bluesman Jimmy Pryor, who worked as a bartender. Big D's only served beer and the bartenders kept order. Years later DePatten recalled that people thrown out of the club

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[25] Celebrate Des Moines Jazz (Des Moines: Central Iowa Jazz Hall of Fame, 2002), videotape. This video contains an interview with Ernest Redd Jr. about his father Speck Redd.

[26] Silag, Outside In, 410-12, 430-57; Poster, Robert Patton Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa.

wanted back in the bar, but DePatten insisted that the bartender and waitress ruled the house.[27]

DePatten had many entrepreneurial activities. He first started working for Harry Hatter when he was thirteen years old. His first business was the Novelty Nook Gift Wagon, a small delivery truck filled with "toys, games, cards, novelties," and stationary. In 1952, he purchased a lot located at 1106 Center and by 1954 his building was under construction. DePatten housed several businesses in his store over the years. From 1957 through 1967, he operated, DePatten's Grill, DePatten's Grill, and Launderette, Larks Tavern, Cloud Nine Restaurant, and Big D's. However, one of the few reported acts of violence noted in the Bystander during the 1960s on Center Street happened at Big Ds.[28]

On September 10, 1966, shots rang out at Big D's tavern. According to news reports and the recollections of DePatten, the fight started out between two women fighting over a man. Ruth Edmond and Alice Granberry shot each other at nearly point blank range fighting over Edmond's husband, Alvah. Amazingly, both women, shot in the stomach, lived.[29]

Another rough and tumble club was the Nip. The Nip, located at 1002 Center Street, was renamed the Hunter's Club in 1961. It remained the Hunter's Club until 1967, when according to the R. L. Polk City Directory it was renamed the Nip. According to Jimmy Pryor, it was only a beer tavern owned by Bill Taylor. Effie Phillips also identified Hershel Hubbard as the previous owner. The Nip had the reputation as being a blue-collar bar. The

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[27] E. Hobart DePatten of Des Moines, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 29 October 2001; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa; R. L. Polk City Directory.

[28] DePatten, personal interview; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa; Narcisse, They Took our Piece of the Pie!, 11.

[29] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 15 September 1966; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa.

Billiken and the Sepia had more upscale cliental, but the Nip was where the workingmen came to drink after work.[30]

The Watkins Hotel and Club played an important part of the Center Street legend. During World War II it was a U. S. O. stop for African American soldiers. At times the Watkins rivaled the Sepia for hot spot in the city. Larry Fountain, an African American veteran remembered returning to Des Moines in the early 1960s to visit the Watkins. Fountain pointed out that you needed to be eighteen to go upstairs. However, if you made it upstairs you found everything going on[31].

Drinking and clubbing was only a small percentage of Center Street businesses. Good food was also available on the street. Perhaps the best known and loved were Harry Hatter's and Trotters. Harry Hatter's claim to fame was his chili. The grease was so thick that you needed to spoon it off before you ate it. Yet, many people choose to eat the grease either before a night of drinking or after over indulging. Many people believed that Hatter's chili would cure hangovers or prevent one. Hatter's also was home to the famous pig ear sandwich and the deluxe special. Anna Cropp remembered ordering the deluxe special, which was "leftover spaghetti with a wiener on top"[32]

Trotter's restaurant was located next to Bell and Holbert's in a large building that also housed the Billiken. What made the establishment unique was the way both businesses worked with each other. Bell and Holbert's had the soda fountain, while Trotter's had food.

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[30] Point Blank (Des Moines) 27 November 2002, Narcisse, They Took our Piece of the Pie!, 6; R. L. Polk City Directory.

[31] Larry Fountain, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 18 October 2002.

[32] Return to Center Street, Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa; Narcisse, They Took our Piece of the Pie!, 17-19. Anna Cropp's story about Spaghetti Deluxe is in both Narcisse's book, and the Center Street Oral History Project.

When a diner of Trotter's ordered pie, it was set on the ledge of a window that separated the two establishments. Then Bell and Holbert's would put ice cream on the pie and send it back to Trotters. It also worked the other way as well. Pam Williams recalled sitting at Bell and Holbert's and requesting a milkshake while ordering Hamburgers next door at Trotters. [33]

Besides Harry Hatter's, Trotter's, the Sepia, and DePatten's Grill, from 1950 to 1968, numerous restaurants lined Center Street. In the 1950s, you could find Mary's Sundries, Deluxe Lunch, Carrie Hightower's, which later became the Snack Shack, and the Community Lunch. In the 1960s, Marie's Pizza, Bells Bar-B-Que, Jimmies Grill, and at Trotter's old location were several restaurants trying to keep afloat. Gray's Café from 1961 to 1962, the Golden Rule in 1963, Bell's Lunch in 1966, and Juniors Café in 1967.[34]

Barber and beauty shops were very popular on Center Street. Hardaway's and the Gray brothers lasted on Center Street for over two decades. The Gray Brothers located at 1204 Center operated in the block of buildings associated with the Billiken. The Gray Brothers cut hair by day and played jazz and blues by night at the Sepia. In 1958, they moved across the street, and Mort's replaced them a few years later at 1204 Center. Mort's lasted until 1967 when he moved to University Avenue. Hardaway Tonsorial Parlor had the longest run on Center Street. It opened in 1928 and lasted until 1968. Hardaway advertised that he had "served 300,000 customers by 1952. Perhaps the best know beautician was Pauline Brown Humphrey, founder of the Crescent School of Beauty. The Crescent School of Beauty lasted on Center until 1968. Humphrey was a graduate of the Madam Walker

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[33] Return to Center Street Oral History Project, 4 November 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa. Narcisse, They Took our Piece of the Pie!, 17-19.

[34] R. L. Polk City Directory.

Beauty School in Chicago. She taught many students who went on to start their own shops. Other beauty shops in the area were Evalon, Berline, and Mildred's.[35]

Studying the R. L. Polk City Directory between the years 1950 to 1970 can shed many interesting facts about Center Street. During that period R. L. Polk sent out enumerators into the neighborhoods to locate buildings, list residences, and to collect new information. Unlike a telephone directory, which lists customers of the phone company, the city directory lists all the residents of the city. However, even with door-to-door enumerators some anomalies sneak in. The biggest anomaly is 1102, 1104, and 1106 Center. Before 1954, 1102 was a vacant lot. Hobart DePatten bought the property and developed it. However, between 1950 and 1970, 1104 and 1106 went from vacant to not listed. It is probable that the enumerators had incorrectly cataloged the property before DePatten built on it, and then continued to list the property as vacant. Otherwise, the business district remained stable through out the 1950s with few vacancies. Furthermore, the more residential area from the 1300 block to the 1500 block of Center had very few unoccupied properties until 1963.[36]

The directory also shows the stability of many of the businesses listed on Center. Hardaway's Barbershop, the billiard parlor, Carrie Hightower's, and the Snack Shack, the Sepia, the Billiken, Bell and Hobart, Ungles Bakery, and the Crescent School of Beauty all lasted from 1950 through 1967. Other businesses such as the Gray Brothers Barbershop, DePatten's various businesses, and the Mason Hall lasted for ten or more years.[37]

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[35] Ibid.; Silag, Outside In, 206.
[36] R. L. Polk City Directory.
[37] Ibid.

Perhaps the most stable area were the apartments, and boarding houses. People such as Fred Martin, Bertha Noel, Joan Bullock, Lela Vandeveer, Garold Bryson, Cottie Lucas, and others were homeowners, or ran boarding houses on Center Street from 1950 to 1967. Furthermore, in that same area Robinson's Grocery, the Saur Apartments, and the Virginia Apartments lasted until 1968.[38]

The Directory also shows the effects of the freeway and urban renewal. From 1950 through 1957, from the 1000 to the 1500 block of Center Street, R. L. Polk enumerators listed anywhere from ten to fifteen buildings vacant, or unlisted of sixty-six possible properties. In 1958, that number jumped to nineteen. This jump was due to early freeway and urban renewal designs that showed the demolition of Center. Some stability returned by 1960 when R. L. Polk listed only sixteen properties as vacant or unlisted. This also reflected the new freeway plans that moved the road to the north of Center Street and away from the business district. However, from 1961 through 1965 the number hovered around twenty. Thereafter the number increased dramatically until 1970 when only Slinker School, a school for special needs students remained. This showed the growth of the Oakridge urban renewal effort, which slowly took apart Center Street from 1966 to 1970.[39]

Between 1957 and 1960, the dream of a black business district began to die on Center Street. The street experienced a slow death of ever increasing vacancies, threats of freeways, and urban renewal. Each year the numbers of vacant properties grew with each new plan. The Des Moines papers such as the Register, the Tribune, and the African American weekly the Bystander fought for the rights of the people who lived there. Yet, none of the papers

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

reported life on Center Street. By the end of the 1960s only memories of the clubs, restaurants, barber and beauty shops, shoeshines, and boarding houses would remain.

A Neighborhood Divided: Freeway Construction and Center Street 1957-1972

Urban renewal and the beginnings of freeway construction did not commence on Center Street in the late 1950s, and early 1960s. The beginnings go back to the mid-1920s with the introduction of the Bartholomew plan in 1925. From 1925, onwards more plans surfaced. Some included the Center Street neighborhood, and others skirted by the street. By 1955, the first announcements of urban renewal and freeway building made it to the papers. However, as a few old-timers admit, they did not think that the actual construction would really come. When construction began in 1959, many people found themselves with no place to go. However, thanks to the hard work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Des Moines Human Rights Commission, (DMHRC) some of the Jim Crow practices of local realtors ended, and those African Americans who could fled the intercity. Yet, those who stayed watched their property values fall and found themselves caught in a trap of on-again-off-again urban renewal and freeway plans. By the time the Model Cities program arrived in Des Moines in the later 1960s few participants from the intercity attended, and in the end, many were disappointed with the results. To understand what happened it is important to follow the planning history of the downtown bypass and freeway construction and the effects of the proposal for a north-south freeway in relation to the Center Street neighborhood.

In 1925, Harland Bartholomew, a city planner from St. Louis Missouri, presented to the city of Des Moines his study of the city. Named A Preliminary Major Street Plan for Des

Moines, Iowa it called for the development of access roads to the greater city. Identified as the Bartholomew Plan, it called for the extension of Ingersoll Avenue. Bartholomew designed the extension and others roads to alleviate traffic from the downtown area and promote growth to the north and south of downtown Des Moines. What made the Ingersoll extension so interesting was that he designed it as a conduit to the east side of Des Moines. Motorists would pass near Methodist hospital, go east over the Des Moines River and bypass downtown. While the city implemented some of the plan, city leaders did not contemplate the Ingersoll extension until the middle 1950s.[1]

In 1955 when R. N. Bergendoff of Kansas City reintroduced the plan, the Ingersoll extension had grown into an elaborate bypass of downtown Des Moines. Bergendoff's vision included four lanes of divided traffic, limited access, and multiple over and underpasses. His original drawings called for the freeway to pass just south of Methodist hospital and dangerously close to First Methodist Church. Both the church and the hospital protested the plan. The City Council asked for other possible ideas. His new design passed just north of Methodist Hospital and one block south of Center Street. The elaborate proposal spared the African American business district. Yet, it still passed through valuable property owned by Methodist Hospital. Construction began on the first part of the extension in June 1955, and concluded by November of that year. However, by 1957, city planners simplified the plan to a block-long diagonal to High Street, which is still in use today. By

[1] City of Des Moines, A Preliminary Major Street Plan for Des Moines, Iowa, 1925, freeways, clipping file, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

1957 there was no need for the Ingersoll extension due to the new freeway proposed by the Iowa Highway Commission.[2]

In 1957, the first reports of freeway construction and urban renewal appeared in local newspapers. The original plan for the freeway called for the road to go south of Veterans Memorial Auditorium and move west straight down Center Street. Furthermore, urban renewal plans for that time period called for the partial demolition of the African American business district.[3]

By 1958, the Freeway Commission redesigned the MacVicar Freeway. On May 13, 1958, the Des Moines Tribune issued a special edition outlining the plans for the proposed freeway. The Tribune explained how the freeway would pass through the heart of the city. The reporter explained that the freeway would pass north of Veterans Memorial Auditorium, instead of south. The new proposal would still adversely affect the Center Street business district. Originally, the plan called for the complete demolition of Center Street. However, freeway planners changed the design so the freeway would pass to the north of Center and divide the African American community. The special edition of the Tribune also included an article explaining how the Freeway Commission would buy the land.[4]

The Commission used four steps to acquire land, and title searches were the first step. The freeway commission went to the county court house and determined the legal owners of the properties in the path of the proposed expressway. Step two was the right-of-way layout. The commission determined the proportion of land needed from each homeowner for

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[2] Des Moines Tribune, 14 December 1955, 6 June 1957.

[3] Des Moines Register, 5 March 1957; Des Moines Register 1957, urban renewal, Clipping file, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

[4] Des Moines Tribune, 13 May 1958.

construction of the freeway. The freeway commission only needed a small portion of property from homeowners along the fringes of the new interstate. The highway commission then negotiated with the landowners about the amount of property required for the freeway. Third, the highway commission sent out appraisers to the affected properties. According to the Tribune, "When an appraiser visits you, you'll find him a friendly but tight-lipped man. He won't tell you the value placed on a neighbor's house, or even the value on your house, that isn't his job." The last step would be the negotiation; however, it was not much of a negotiation. The article explained that the negotiator would not "dicker or horsetrade with you. That isn't his job. But he will tell you how the appraiser arrived at his figure." It is this process of non-negotiable negotiations that angered African Americans.[5]

Two weeks after publication of the Tribune's special edition, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People met to discuss the repercussions of the proposed freeway. The proposal created two problems for the community. First, it would destroy the Center Street neighborhood. Second, it would diminish housing available for African Americans. At that time, many African Americans displaced by the River Hills urban renewal project relocated into the Center Street neighborhood. Furthermore, Des Moines in the late 1950s was a "closed town." African Americans were limited to black segregated neighborhoods. This problem dated back to the turn of the century when white real estate agents unofficially designated certain areas in Des Moines as only suitable for African Americans, also known as red lining.

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[5] Ibid.

About 1910, four areas of Des Moines were red lined for African Americans. These black neighborhoods were: the Center Street district (located north west of downtown Des Moines), the Walker Street district (located on the eastside of Des Moines near University Avenue), the Cherry Street area (which was a "shanty town" area west of down town Des Moines), and a region near the Sevastopol neighborhood (near the Southeast Bottoms). By the late 1950s African Americans were limited to Center, Walker, River Hills (located north of downtown where the main post office now sits), and the Southeast Bottoms districts by real estate agents who forced African Americans to buy property in these areas regardless of how much money they had to spend on housing. This problem would occupy the Bystander, Des Moines African American newspaper edited by James B. Morris and the NAACP, in the years following 1958.[6]

During the meeting of the NAACP with city leaders on May 28, 1958, and two weeks after the Tribune's special edition, an article in the Bystander reported, "civic leaders admitted Tuesday evening that the 2,500 homes, which will be affected by the freeway and the city's first urban renewal (River Hills) will create more problems for Negro's than whites." The government officials believed that there was plenty of housing available in Des Moines for the displaced homeowners. Conversely, Harry Beardsley representing Grace Methodist Church exclaimed we are deluding "ourselves if we don't admit that some opposition exists," against allowing African Americans to move into white neighborhoods. The city officials thought Des Moines could absorb the displaced African American

[6] Jack Lufkin, "Black Des Moines: A Study of Select Negro Social Organizations in Des Moines, Iowa, 1890-1930," (master's thesis, Iowa State University 1980), 24; Gabriel Victor Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1918), 11-12; E. Hobart DePatten, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 29 October 2001.

community, but Beardsley's assessment proved insightful. Over the next two years the NAACP fought many battles with both city officials and white real estate agents.[7]

Later that summer, Bystander editor Morris showed concern regarding housing for those displaced by the freeway. He praised the city for making a commitment to see that "no person so dispossessed will be without a place to live." Additionally, he hoped that people of the intercity would receive a fair price for their houses. This hope, however, was short lived.[8]

On August 14, 1958, the NAACP met again to share its concerns regarding the new freeway. The NAACP addressed four concerns. First, it noted that 175 of the 400 African American families affected by the building of the freeway lived in the first area under construction. Second, the NAACP was concerned with real estate agents who were asking white residents in the fringe areas of the inner city to sell their homes to African Americans. The agents, by enticing blacks to live in areas near the inner city, could maintain "Negro ghettoes." Third, the NAACP lambasted realtors who offered only to show African Americans properties in negro areas or in the fringe areas of the inner city. Fourth, even African Americans who could afford better housing in white neighborhoods were forced to buy old homes in the fringe neighborhoods for prices above market value. The NAACP encouraged African Americans in the affected areas not to panic and not to buy houses that they did not want. The NAACP planned to hold more informational meetings. It wanted to keep people from "panic buying" and to educate them on house buying. However, less then

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[7] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 29 May 1958.
[8] Ibid., 7 August 1958.

a month later the NAACP would soon be battling the Urban Renewal Commission on the location of alternative housing for displaced families.[9]

The Des Moines Urban Renewal Commission announced a housing development for displaced families. The new project called Leetown Court (later renamed Cleveland Park) was located between East Fifteenth and East Sixteenth Streets and Washington and Cleveland Avenue. In September 1958, when the Urban Renewal Commission made its announcement the area consisted of at least 124 decaying houses. In fact, by January of the next year the city council gave the green light to condemn 124 houses in the Leetown neighborhood. Morris of the Bystander was understandably concerned since the area around the project was a dilapidated housing and industrial area of Des Moines. He was also concerned with the city's turn-around on the housing issue. At the NAACP meeting earlier in the spring, city officials had made it known that they believed that a sufficient number of houses were available in the city for those dispossessed. However, now they were saying that there was a lack of housing and the city needed this new project. The Urban Renewal Commission believed that the location was ideal, and city leaders concurred that moderate income housing in the industrial area would provide a good neighborhood for displaced African Americans. The editor of the Bystander insisted that African Americans should live anywhere in Des Moines.[10]

By the next week the NAACP had moved into action. The NAACP believed that the new housing project would only enlarge the Negro area on the eastside and would segregate schools. However, Lawrence Oliver, an African American lawyer on the Urban Renewal

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[9] Ibid., 14 August 1958.
[10] Ibid., 11 September 1958; Des Moines Tribune, 14 October 1959.

Board, explained that the property was suitable for $8,000 dollar houses. Oliver stated, "This is the only area where we can find lots cheap enough to put up $8,000 houses. I don't believe the problem is as big as some think. It isn't the best in Des Moines, but you can't build a $9,000 house on an expensive lot." However, Oliver's explanation did not appease the NAACP, and two months later Attorney Luther Glanton and the Des Moines Commission on Human Rights and Job Discrimination (DMCHRJD) intervened in the dispute.[11]

The DMCHRJD members persuaded the Des Moines city council to postpone a decision on the eastside housing project. Commission members also promised to offer the city three alternative sites for consideration. They reiterated the arguments that both the Bystander and the NAACP had made before, namely that the project was located in an industrial area and that it was already an African American community, and it would lead to even more segregated schools.[12]

By November 6 1958, the DMCHRJD leaders offered three alternative housing sites to the Urban Renewal Board. The areas were located in the River Bend, Highland/Union Park, and the Easton Boulevard neighborhoods. The Urban Renewal Board replied that while these neighborhoods were good locations they did not meet the necessary requirements of being a blighted neighborhood in order to receive the two million dollar federal grant. Against the opposition of African American civil rights groups the Urban Renewal Board sent the plan to the City Council giving the go ahead to build on the Washington-Cleveland site.[13]

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[11] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 18 September 1958.
[12] Ibid., 23 October 1958.
[13] Ibid., 6 November 1958.

The Des Moines Valley Friends Meeting, a Quaker group that earlier in the year conducted a door-to-door survey of the Center Street district, joined the NAACP and DMCHRJD. The Quakers met with the Urban Renewal Board at the City Council meeting on November 11, 1958. During the meeting, the NAACP once again put forth its objections to the project. The Quakers concurred and predicted that the people in the affected areas would have nowhere to go except sub-standard housing in African American neighborhoods. However, the City Council voted unanimously to approve the Washington-Cleveland site over the impassioned pleas of the civil rights groups. With the vote taken in January the Council authorized the condemnation of 124 lots located in the new Leetown Court.[14]

The New Year would not prove much better for African American families looking to move from the inner city. Two days after Christmas a cross burned in the yard of a white minister who was selling his house to an African American couple displaced by the freeway. The house, located at 3107 57th Street was in a white neighborhood. The neighbors had previously conducted a contentious meeting with the buyer, Harold Carr, at a real-estate office on Ingersoll Avenue. Carr balked at an offer of one thousand dollars to move from the area. Several days later a cross burned in the yard of Carr's new home. Years later Anna Cropp recalled that Carr was not frightened by the Klan. As she recalled he "Klux, Kluxed them back." Both she and Hobart DePatten remembered that Carr stayed at the house until his death in the 1970s.[15]

In response to the cross burning the Human Rights Commission of Des Moines listed five necessary steps needed to protect displaced African American homeowners. The

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[14] Ibid., 10 July 1958, 13 November 1958; Des Moines Tribune, 14 October, 1959.

[15] Iowa Bystander, (Des Moines), 1 January 1959. Return to Center Street Oral History Project, November 4, 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa.

concerns resembled those of the NAACP from the previous year. It was not until January 15, 1959, that the executive secretary of the Commission, Malcolm Higgins, blasted white real estate agents for blatant segregation. He criticized the unwritten code that "Negroes are expected, as a normal and desirable thing to live only with other Negroes, whites only with other whites." He also attacked the practices of encouraging whites to move out of the newly "Opened" blocks and of discouraging whites from moving back into those areas. Higgins urged real estate agents to work with churches and social action groups that are "working to eliminate all vestiges of housing segregation." Editor Morris also agreed with Higgins. Morris lamented. "Where will these people go?" To Morris it was time for Des Moines "to be an example for the whole nation in opening up neighborhoods all over the city for all qualified persons."[16]

By January 22, 1959, momentum began to build for African Americans in their quest to live in any neighborhood. All of the Methodist pastors in Des Moines signed a declaration against racial discrimination in housing. Seven days later, the Des Moines Commission on Human Rights asked the city to draft an anti-bias housing law. Malcolm Higgins wrote to city attorney Robert J. Spadye and asked that the city make future permits and approvals of city services to contractors who would make them available to all races. He also stated that "the practice of private builders of obtaining such services from the city in order to construct new housing which is made available only to white buyers is detrimental to the best interests of the community." Higgins continued. "Such discrimination disregards the rights and

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[16] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 15 January 1959.

privileges of our Negro citizens and undermines the foundations of our democratic government."[17]

The hard work of the NAACP, the Human Rights Commission, the Bystander, and the religious groups had paid off by the spring of 1959. The editor of the Bystander reported that the situation had improved. Even though some white owners had apparently sold their houses to African Americans to punish their neighbors, on the whole, most sold their houses because they had "a genuine interest in solving a problem which long has needed a solution." Yet, now that the market had opened somewhat for African Americans, a new problem had arrived: "cash market prices."[18]

As stated earlier, the process of buying property for the freeway together with the urban renewal projects was a four-phase task. The procedure consisted of title searches, right of way determinations, appraisals, and negotiations. Throughout the process, homeowners could not talk to appraisers about the value of their houses. Even during the negotiation phase, homeowners were not to bargain or "horse trade." The only recourse for African Americans was to take their complaint to the city's Urban Renewal Board. On May 14, 1959, the Bystander reported that David Picket of 1215 School Street was fighting the Iowa Highway Commission. Pickett charged that the Highway Commission was paying "cash market prices," versus "open market prices." According to Pickett cash market prices were several thousand dollars lower than open market prices. Pickett exclaimed, " We are being

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[17] Ibid., 29 January 1959.
[18] Ibid., 16 April 1959, 14 May 1959.

forced to move from our area into the 'White' slum areas and pay fantastic prices for homes not as good as ours."[19]

By the next week, over 100 other families took up Pickett's complaint. Pickett protested to the Urban Renewal Board that the money offered was not sufficient to "replace our property with similar property." He was also angry that the Highway Commission agent would not negotiate with him. After hearing Pickett's complaints the Board decided to send a committee consisting of Dr. Thomas Scales and his alternate attorney Lawrence Oliver, both African Americans, to the Highway Commission.[20]

The NAACP once again championed the cause of the beleaguered homeowners. At a meeting on May 27, 1959, the NAACP heard the personal arguments of several homeowners. Attending the meeting were H. A. Heverly and Don Cole, both representing the Highway Commission. Once again, Pickett led the charge. He wanted to know why only real estate agents worked on freeway appraisals. Heverly replied, "it was because they know the situation in Des Moines better." Pickett's mother, Maude Pickett lamented: "What am I going to do? They paid me only $3,400 for my home and I've been looking two or three months and can't find a place to go. When I told people I was looking for a house which would cost what the Highway Commission paid me they laughed at me. My home is a nice home, with apple trees and room enough on the ground for another house to be built." Moved by the Pickett's plight and by the plight of the other 100 families in attendance, the

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[19] Des Moines Tribune, 13 May 1958; Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 14 May 1959.
[20] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 21 May 1959.

NAACP sent a telegraph to the Bureau of Federal Roads and to the national NAACP protesting the actions of the Highway Commission.[21]

However the June 4 editorial in the Bystander voiced the opinion that it was probably too late to fight the battles in court. Morris also used the editorial as an opportunity to push for the idea of "low cost federal housing projects." He believed that low prices offered for the affected homes and the high cost of moving had placed many people "in a bad spot and they are pretty sore about it." However, it would take almost ten years before anyone would build low-income housing. [22]

The Des Moines school district also fought the Freeway Commission over the price of its buildings. In 1961, the district clashed with the commission over the price offered for Crocker School. The school, located on Sixth and Crocker, was four blocks east of Center Street. The commission offered $325,000 for the school, while the district held out for $565,000. Drake Mabry a reporter for the Tribune pointed out that the school built in 1875 had additions in 1910 and 1925. W. C. Findley the assistant superintendent of schools questioned the appraisal methods used. However, Heverly explained that the matter "will go before a sheriff's condemnation jury." He also admitted that the commission also had to wait to buy two other district properties, Webster and Longfellow Schools.[23]

On July 23, 1959, the Bystander reported some good news. In contrast to the African American family that was harassed at Christmas time in a white neighborhood, a different black family was welcomed to a white neighborhood. Someone in the neighborhood spray-painted hate filled graffiti on the James McDaniel's home. The McDaniel family then

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[21] Ibid., 28 May 1959.
[22] Ibid., 4 June 1959.
[23] Des Moines Tribune, 25 January 1961.

received two boxes of groceries and a sack of potatoes with a note that read, " we're sorry someone among us acted like a fool. Maybe this will help make your moving days easier. We're glad to have you here and hope we can be good neighbors." While the story is a positive account reflecting race relations, it did not reveal the reality of African American homeownership in white neighborhoods. The McDaniel's were unfortunately the exception to the rule. As the Des Moines Tribune observed in 1961, less than six months after the incident at the McDaniel's house only twelve other African American families had moved out of redlined districts into white neighborhoods.[24]

Perhaps the last good news to come to Center Street neighborhood was the opening of the new youth center. Located at 1301 Center Street, it was probably one of the last African American businesses built on Center. According to E. Hobart DePatten, an important businessman from the African American community, the youth center, owned by The Brotherhood Inc., was only the second building on Center Street constructed by African Americans in the 1950s. The other building was DePatten's Launderette and Grill.[25]

In contrast to the youth center, the Colored YMCA, at 1333 Keosauqua Way, was one of the first businesses in the Center Street district to close. Also known as the Crocker YMCA, it had stood for 40 years, but it was now in the way of the proposed freeway. Many African Americans loved the Crocker Y. Bobby Parker recalled, "My first recollection of Center Street was when I was 14 or 15 years old. A friend and I used to go to the Crocker Y

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[24] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 23 July 1959; Des Moines Tribune, 23 March 1961.

[25] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 13 August 1959; Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 11.

and play outside basketball." John Long pointed out that the city never replaced the Crocker Y. Instead, the YMCA expected African Americans to use the downtown facility.[26]

By mid-October, the City had completed the acquisition of properties located in Leetown Court. According to Robert McCall, a reporter for the Tribune, the city planed to spend two million dollars on the project so that 200 families displaced by the freeway and the River Hills urban renewal efforts could find adequate housing. However as late as 1965, the maligned Leetown Court, renamed Cleveland Park, had only 31 of 156 lots sold. The project continued to languish and remained vacant until 1969 when private developers took over the project.[27]

The final process of buying properties in the Center Street area for the freeway began in 1961. H. A. Heverly in a Tribune interview expected to have all 180 properties bought by June of that year and that the building of the Second and Sixth Avenue bridges would commence.[28]

Freeway construction continued through out the sixties ending in 1968. However, the former Center Street neighborhood now known as Oakridge soon had another freeway looming on the horizon. In 1966, the Iowa Highway Commission proposed a new north-south freeway. The commission did not present any specific plans, but it expressed the need for a highway to run north and south through the city to relieve traffic on the new MacVicar

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[26] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 21, 26; Bystander (Des Moines), 4 June 1959.
[27] Des Moines Tribune, 14 October 1959, 5 April 1970; Des Moines Register, 3 October 1965.
[28] Des Moines Tribune, 25 January 1961.

Freeway, and an additional highway to the east and south of Des Moines that would belt the city.[29]

The Highway Commission presented its plans in 1968, and the members proposed a mile-wide swath for the future freeway. According to maps, the huge path would cross through most of the Oakridge renewal area. With the Oakridge neighborhood in the path of yet another freeway, urban renewal officials asked residents to stop repairing their homes. Max Krumrey, director of urban renewal, admitted in a Tribune report that he and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) representative, Robert Neidhart, "were caught by surprise by the freeway announcement." Furthermore, Dorothy Griffith who lived in the urban development area remarked, "It seems to me that at the time urban renewal started, somebody should have known about this (freeway)." Reverend Samuel Palmer, from Saint Johns Catholic Church summed up the feelings of the residents. "What these people are saying is that they have been affected by one government program and even two, with the MacVicar Freeway, and urban renewal. Can't you see to it that those areas are left unaffected by the north-south freeway?"[30]

By March of 1970 the Department of Housing and Urban Development ended funding to the Oakridge project. Citing the future north-south freeway, regional administrator for renewal assistance in Chicago, Thomas Kilbride, ordered a "stop to rehabilitation loans and grants to the area." While it seemed that the Homes of Oakridge, the new low-medium income housing project had escaped the proposed freeway, those who had

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[29] Ibid., 13 December 1966. For this study, I will only be discussing the north-south freeway and its impact on urban renewal up to the early 70s. The desire for this freeway continues today with the Martin Luther King Parkway project that has its own long history.

[30] Des Moines Tribune, 24 January 1969; Des Moines Register, 1 March 1971.

moved from Center Street to Harding Road (Martin Luther King Parkway) had fallen into yet another quagmire. However, this time both the city and the media joined the fray to help save homes.[31]

The Des Moines Tribune editors blasted the Highway Commission for its indecision. While the commission had narrowed the freeway swath from a mile to a few blocks wide, they had decided to delay land buying until 1976. The editors of the Tribune noted that the announcement of the road in the mid-1960s had "the effect of chilling development throughout the area." They went on to say, "The Oakridge rehabilitation project has all but ground to a halt because of uncertainty about the freeway. Homeowners are reluctant to fix up their properties in Oakridge. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has imposed a moratorium on sale of lots in the western portion of the urban renewal area. Rehabilitation loans and grants are at a standstill." Suddenly, people began to question the need for another freeway. Donald Kaul a popular columnist for the Register smirked at the design of the new road remarking that it crossed the Raccoon River three times, "it's not a freeway, it's a tour of the city." Kaul also made some insightful comments about freeway construction, urban renewal and the middle class. "For the past 20 years in this country, the federal government has been tearing up peoples homes to build high rises, and low rises and rejuvenate downtown business districts and push through freeways. But mainly, they have been poor people's homes. The middle class has been left almost untouched. With the proposed north-south freeway, however, progress comes to Beaverdale." [32]

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[31] Des Moines Tribune, 21 March 1970.
[32] Ibid., 17 October 1970; Des Moines Register 22, March 1971.

The Model Cities Board was also against the new freeway. Many of the residents in the path of the new road faced what could be their fourth move in ten years. Charles Sevilla, a graduate student from the University of Santa Clara interviewed many of the Model Cities residents. "Many of the residents there already are upset because they have been forced to move one or more times by construction of the MacVicar Freeway or by the River Hills, and Oakridge urban renewal projects." Sevilla, made the point that freeway construction destroyed housing, isolated poor neighborhoods, and disrupted urban renewal.[33]

By the Spring of 1971, the city council had grown tired of the controversy. Led by Mayor Tom Urban and councilman Jens Grothe, the Des Moines City Council voted to reject the north-south freeway. By rejecting the freeway the city expected the federal government to lift the loan freeze in the Oakridge renewal area.[34]

The north-south freeway debate would continue into the 1980s and 1990s with the Martin Luther King Parkway (MLK). The MLK followed the same path as the former north-south freeway, and many of the arguments from the 1970s resurfaced years later. It also brought the opportunity to revisit the hardships brought by the MacVicar Freeway. In 1985, Elizabeth Flansburg wrote about the displacement of African Americans due to construction of Interstate 235, and in a separate article cited Sevilla's study about the detriments of a north-south freeway to residents in the inner city.[35]

The displacement caused by the MacVicar freeway continued to cause hard feelings into 2002. The rebuilding of I-235 brought back memories of many people of the original construction. Register reporter Tom Alex talked to several people about the freeway. Robert

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[33] Des Moines Register, 3 January 1971.
[34] Ibid., 1 March 1971.
[35] Ibid., 3 April 1985.

Wright, past president of the Iowa Nebraska NAACP, recalled, "'Urban renewal' was known as 'Negro removal', and some people thought the black community was being 'targeted' by planners of the new freeway." Barbara James, "a former community organizer for city government," said, "the general feeling was that no one ever wins when they try to fight the government."[36]

African Americans in Des Moines believed that they had suffered the brunt of freeway construction and urban renewal. No other area in Des Moines faced such constant upheaval as the Center Street district. It is true that other areas of Des Moines faced destruction from the freeway. On the westside of Des Moines, homeowners and businessmen organized the Home and Business Protection League in 1958. Their fight to save their homes was no different from those in the inner city. However, those residents did not have to face multiple urban renewal efforts or the speculation of the north-south freeway.[37]

Even today, African Americans have voiced many angry feelings over the loss of their homes due to freeway construction. However, the freeway alone did not destroy Center Street. The freeway merely split the neighborhood and effectively separated the business district from many of the customers that now resided on the other side of a concrete river. Furthermore, Interstate 235 was only the second part of a four-part process of urban renewal, freeway construction, more urban renewal, and finally the proposed freeway that never truly went away. The constant change in the Center Street neighborhood nurtured a strong dislike for city government. Yet, I-235 and the north-south freeway in the end were only half of the

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[36] Ibid, 18 March 2002.
[37] Ibid.

story. The true death of Center Street was due to the urban renewal movements of the 1960s. Center Street had survived the freeway, but by October of 1969, bulldozers appeared poised to tear down the street.

Center Street Falls: Urban Renewal and Center Street 1957-1970

On a crisp October evening in 1969, Al "Hinky" Brewer climbed up on top of his car to survey the scene. From this vantage point, he saw the ghosts of Center Street's past. He could almost see the hustle and bustle of people walking from the old Billiken Theater to the legendary Sepia Club. The names of the nightclubs may have changed over the years, but the music never did. The greatest jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues artists of the day came through the doors of those clubs. Louie Armstrong, Count Basie, Chuck Berry, Cab Calloway, Jay McShane, Speck Redd, Irene Myles, Jimmy Pryor, The Soul Brothers, and many more artists too numerous to name. Yet, it was not just the sights and sounds that brought people down to Center Street but the smells. Take for example the down home cooking of Trotter's and Harry Hatter's. Their homemade pies and pig ear sandwiches delighted young and old alike. Then there was Barbara's Chicken Shack, a place so hidden on the strip that few knew of its great fried chicken. Barbara's Chicken Shack offered many southerners a taste of home that could drive the blues away on a cold Iowa night. There was Ungles Baking Company; at the right time of the day Center Street crowds could smell the sweet aroma of baked bread through out the business district. Nevertheless, that was not all that Al saw. He also saw the people. Young families parked in their cars enjoyed the music drifting out into the streets. Couples paraded down the block dressed in their finest clothes as

they went from club to club, while proud African American police officers patrolled the streets and kept them safe.[1]

Reminders of all of these wonderful sights, sounds, and smells would be gone by the morning. The 790 Club was the last nightclub open on Center; by the next day it and the rest of the buildings on Center Street would be a pile of rubble. The 790, originally the Billiken Theater was the site of the last concert held on Center. Al Brewer, like most of Des Moines's African Americans, had fond memories not only of the 790 Club, but also of Center Street. Unfortunately for Al, he arrived too late for the final show. He was so mad that he "climbed up on the hood of his car," and took the Center Street sign down from the street corner.[2]

Others mourned the demise of Center Street. Many of the African Americans who lived, worked, and played in the neighborhood felt the same way as Al Brewer. Several of these people were small business owners, or members of the working class who did not move away from the Center Street area. They were also not among the elite of the African American community. Through the years many of them have felt voiceless. Several of them believed that urban renewal, and eminent domain took Center Street from them. Regardless of right or wrong, many of the actions of the city between 1957 and 1970 left an indelible

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[1] Gaynelle Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie! (Des Moines: Bystander publishing, 1996), 9, 25. Also see, Jack Lufkin, "Patten's Neighborhood: The Center Street Community and the African American Printer who Preserved It," Iowa Heritage Illustrated 77, (No. 3, 1996). For more information about the beginnings of Center Street see, Gabriel Victor Cools, "The Negro in Typical Communities of Iowa," (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1918), and Jack Lufkin "Black Des Moines: A Study of Select Negro Social Organizations in Des Moines, Iowa, 1890-1930," (master's thesis, Iowa State University 1980).

[2] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 25. The 790 owned and operated by Mel Harper, who moved to the corner of ninth and University, and co-owned Roberts Lounge. The members of the Soul Brothers were, Willis Dobbins, Butch Edmonds, Gene Jackson, Rick Lussie, Ronnie McClain, and Harlan Thomas. The Center Street sign taken by Al Brewer is on display at the Historical Building of Iowa.

mark on this group of African Americans. As Gaynelle Narcisse lamented in, They Took Our Piece of the Pie![3]

During the 1960's, metropolitan areas witnessed the crumbling of their inner cities. Memphis, Kansas City, and Des Moines, all chose different ways to revitalize their inner cities. Memphis decided to convert Beale Street into a homogenized white tourist Mecca. One Memphis official said, "If Disney could do it for Frontierland, why couldn't Memphis do it for the home of the blues?" [4]

Kansas City's inner city slowly decayed through neglect. Starting in the early 1960s the infrastructure of the 18th and Vine district corroded away until only the Gem Theater and a few abandoned businesses stood there. Later in the 1990s, Kansas City's mayor, Emanuel Cleaver, would spearhead the drive to build the American Jazz Museum, and the Colored Baseball League Hall of Fame, which revitalized the area.[5]

Des Moines, by contrast, was able to attract federal dollars through various federal urban renewal grants. The first grant came in the late 1950s, and helped to develop the River Hills area. This blighted section of town, just north of downtown and along the river, had become a rundown shantytown by the 1950s. Undeveloped roads, fallen houses, and lack of adequate sanitation made River Hills an ideal location for urban renewal. The project had many detractors during the years. From its beginnings until the mid 1960s, the project languished from over expectations, and higher expenditures. Nevertheless, by 1971 when

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[3] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 40

[4] David Bowman, "Beale Street Blues," Southern Exposure 5, (No 1, 1977), 76.

[5] Chuck Haddix, 18th & Vine: Streets of Dreams. [online] http://www.umkc.edu/orgs/kcjazz/jazztext18thvine.htm., accessed October 2002. No longer available see, Kansas City Star, 6 August 1961, 10 September 1975, 6 January 1977; Kansas City Tribune, 25 September 1935, 16 August 1961, 28 April 1984.

finished it became not only a gem for the city, but a moneymaker as well. River Hills developed into the location of the United States Main Post Office, as well as housing for medium and low-income families.[6]

The Oakridge Urban Renewal project turned into the second important renovation of the city of Des Moines. The Oakridge plan called for the demolition of Center Street, and the surrounding neighborhood. First proposed in 1957 the project became an on-again-off-again proposal. Many detractors compared Oakridge with the River Hills project. However, once River Hills became a success the Oakridge project became a reality. The Model Cities program became the last of the three major inner city programs of urban renewal during the 1960s, and early 1970s. This program was the basis of former President Lyndon Johnson's urban policies. Johnson who was president from 1963-1969 was in the middle of his "war against poverty." The idea was to funnel all the available funds locally and federally into "targeted slum areas." The Model Cities area included an area north of Keo Way, to Enos Avenue. While the Model Cities project did not affect the Oakridge urban renewal effort directly, the Model Cities area attracted many of the Oakridge residents.[7]

Plans for the Center Street neighborhood or the Oakridge project date back to 1957. However, the city was slow to move on the project until completion of River Hills. By the early 1960s, the interests of the city council and residents of Des Moines waned for the Oakridge plan. Yet, in December 1957, Oakridge and River Hills started as the same project.

According to a Des Moines Register report by Don Allen, the City Council targeted a large part of downtown Des Moines for improvement. The accompanying map showed a

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[6] Des Moines Register, 1957, urban renewal, clipping file, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

[7] Ibid.

large section of downtown from the railroad tracks to the south all the way to the Des Moines River and the Second Avenue Bridge on the north. From east to west, it covered a big area from Harding Road to East Fourteenth. The map showed the area divided into three zones, total clearance, partial clearance, and general neighborhood improvement. Center Street sat on the dividing line between partial clearance and general improvement. However, the map is very confusing. It shows Keo Way bisecting the intersection of Fourteenth and Center. In reality, Keo Way intersected Center at Tenth Street.[8]

According to reports in the Tribune, the Des Moines city council declared River Hills as the number one urban renewal project. The council also accepted the establishment of the urban renewal board as well in December of 1957. By April of the next year, the federal government approved $169,000 for planning of the River Hills Project. By December of that year, the government approved initial plans, and the City council contracted with Real Estate Research Corp from Chicago to make a study of the marketability and reuse of the area.[9]

By January 1959, the city council authorized Richard J Leyden and the Chicago Real Estate Research Corp to appraise properties in the renewal areas. The council also asked the legal department to condemn 124 lots in the Leetown Court relocation housing area. This is the same section of town between Washington and Cleveland Avenues that played an important role during freeway relocation. Additionally the Leetown Court neighborhood would house those displaced by the River Hills urban renewal project.[10]

The Oakridge area would not become its own urban renewal area until June of 1959. The Des Moines city council approved the concept in June, and by October the council filed

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Des Moines Tribune, 14 October 1959
[10] Ibid.

for funds from the Federal government to pay for preparations "of a general neighborhood renewal plan for Oakridge." This, with the combined freeway plans, signaled the finish of Center Street. However, the plans for Oakridge would ebb and flow causing confusion in the neighborhood, and in the end help to drive down property valuations in the Center Street neighborhood.[11]

In the October 14, 1959, Des Moines Tribune, a map of the two urban renewal areas showed the division between River Hills, and Oakridge. It also showed the future freeway that would divide both areas. Besides outlining the progress of urban renewal in Des Moines, the article, written by Robert McCall, provided the names of the Urban Renewal Board, "John Connolly, Jr., Chairman; Charles T. Cownie, co-chairman; Mrs. Hepburn Ingham, Fred H. Powers and W. Lawrence Oliver. Oliver was an African American lawyer, and had replaced the late Dr. Thomas Scales a black doctor who died in 1959 of a heart attack. With Oliver on the committee an African American voice would remain on the commission. [12]

While the Human Rights Commission, the Urban Renewal Board, and the NAACP had worked hard to improve housing for African Americans displaced by urban renewal and the freeway, the editors of Des Moines Tribune realized that very little had changed over the past few years. In an editorial on March 23 1961, the Tribune's editors blasted real estate agents, and homebuilders. Quoting the latest information from the city Commission on Human Rights the editors explained that real estate agents denied African Americans the opportunity to purchase or rent homes built after World War II. Furthermore, Robert

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

Spiegel, a Tribune reporter, conducted a survey of African American homeowners. Spiegel found that in 1956 only five black families lived outside the redlined district, "by January, 1960 the number had risen to twelve, by January, 1961 to eighteen. Spiegel, while happy that some had escaped the inner city and the fringe areas, the figures still represented "token numbers."[13]

The River Hills renewal project created new problems for the city. By 1962, it was apparent that most of the people displaced by the project had moved to other areas and those neighborhoods became blighted. A map published by the Des Moines Register showed that the majority of River Hills residents moved west into the Oakridge renewal area, north into the future Model Cities, and River Bend areas, and east into the Walker Avenue neighborhood. Dwight Jensen reported for the Register that urban renewal and the freeway forced 2,950 people from River Hills, 450 of them were African Americans. Furthermore, freeway relocation forced an additional 500 to move. Considering the climate of the times many African American families found themselves moving into future renewal projects, such as Oakridge, and Model Cities. Much like the freeway fight, African American leaders complained about the inability to buy housing in white areas. Even John Caswell the city relocation director of the time admitted, "there is much discrimination here."[14]

In addition, in 1962, Leetown Court became Cleveland Park. However, the new name change did not attract anyone to live there. The original plan had called for 200 family dwellings. Yet, by Christmas of 1962, contractors had only built 15 home, and no one from

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[13] Ibid., 23 March 1961.
[14] Des Moines Register, 25 December 1962.

the River Hills renewal area had moved there. According to Jensen while no one had moved to Cleveland Park "dozens moved from River Hills into Oakridge.[15]

Beside the large influx of African Americans moving into Oakridge, a disappearing surplus of city funds led to calls to end the Oakridge renewal project. On July 17, 1962, City Manager Elder Gunter explained that Oakridge was the "major reason for the increase in spending proposed in the 1963 city budget." However, Gunter pointed out that project was not the main reason for the increase in property taxes, explaining that most of the money for renewal effort came from federal loans. Nonetheless, the city council questioned the ability of the city to pay for two renewal plans. River Hills had still not blossomed into the retail/industrial area that the city had hoped. The city council sold the project to the voters by proclaiming that many private investors would move into the area and put in new industries on the west side of the river, and apartments on the east side. Yet, many private interests were not interested in the area and were taking a wait and see attitude. Critics stated that it was wrong to proceed with Oakridge until River Hills paid off.[16]

Two days later pressure mounted against the Des Moines City Council to discontinue Oakridge. The Build America Better Committee of the National Association of Real Estate Boards made nineteen recommendations to the council based on a four-day study of housing problems in Des Moines. The first priority was the demolition of the Southeast Bottoms, and its replacement with an 18-hole golf course. Second, they believed that local businessmen needed to immediately invest in River Hills. Third, "that the city cut back its plans for Oakridge...on grounds that the money can be better spent elsewhere... particularly the

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 17 July 1962

Southeast Bottoms." The council did not comment about the report, and according to reporter James Flansburg, "the meeting only lasted seven minutes." However, the biggest surprise of the report had to do with Oakridge. The committee believed that River Hills project was to big for a city the size of Des Moines. They proposed curtailing Oakridge. However, while they proposed cutting out most of the area from the wrecking ball they still insisted on the demolition of Center Street. Robert Huston, Chairman of Des Moines Real Estate Board's Build America Better Committee said, "we do not believe that plans should be abandoned for the now well-advanced segment of the project which provides for expansion of Iowa Methodist Hospital and a site for Still College (Now Des Moines University, and the former College of Osteopathic Medicine)[17]

The City Council met informally on July 21 1962. At that meeting, they decided that Des Moines needed to abandon or cut back the Oakridge urban renewal project. Citing concerns over city finances and the delay in finding people to invest in River Hills made council members to put Oakridge on hold. Three days later City Manager Elder Gunter announced the delay in Oakridge. He anticipated that it would take two to four years before the city could afford to proceed with the project. According to Tribune reports the sharpest criticism of the Oakridge project had to do with Methodist expansion and the building of Still College. Many city council members believed that developing the land for tax-free groups would cost the city $38,000 of tax revenue a year. Finally, by August 3, 1962, the City Council voted to cut Oakridge from the budget. At that point, it looked as if Center Street

[17] Des Moines Tribune, 19 July 1962.

had finally escaped demolition. However, over the next two years River Hills started to pay off.[18]

Starting in 1963 the Register and Tribune ran stories touting the future of River Hills. An artist made a drawing of the future cityscape, with large apartment buildings, expanded Mercy Hospital, and industrial buildings along the river. Over the next few years River Hills slowly appeared more profitable to the city. Even though the city would not break even until 1971 on the River Hills urban renewal effort, by 1965 the idea of revitalizing the Oakridge district once again became a popular topic for the city council.[19]

By October 21, 1965, the on-and-off again Oakridge plan started to take shape. The Des Moines Commission on Human Rights and Job Discrimination (DMCHRJD) unanimously agreed that the Des Moines City Council should proceed with the first part of the Oakridge urban renewal project. The first phase called for total clearance of everything "south of the freeway and east of Fifteenth Street." It appeared to the editors of the Bystander that government approval would come within the next few months.[20]

Then on November 11, 1965, Mrs. Jack Cleveland from the DMCHRJD, wrote a letter to the Des Moines City Council, once again, to urge Des Moines to move on the Oakridge project. The city council voted unanimously to receive the recommendation from the DMCHRJD, and refer the project to the city manager.[21]

However, James B. Morris, editor of the Bystander, sensed frustration with the slow process of urban renewal. Morris believed that politics had caused the delays. Furthermore,

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[18] Des Moines Register, 21 July 1962, 24 July 1962, 3 August 1962.

[19] Des Moines Tribune, 5 April 1970, Des Moines Register, 10 June 1965, 29 April 1973, Des Moines Tribune, 1963, Urban Renewal, clipping file, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

[20] Iowa Bystander, (Des Moines) 21 October 1965.

[21] Ibid., 11 November 1965.

he questioned the strategy of the government. The policy of the "war on poverty" was to allow those who were most affected participate in the process. "This is not unreasonable," Morris wrote. "It gives people who heretofore have had no experience in community planning to participate in such affairs." Yet, Morris continued, "but in an effort to let the public make their own projects, the program is mired down by those who didn't want it in the first place and by those who want it to go on but have no way to force action."[22]

In December, the DMCHRJD started a campaign to ensure low-rent housing through out Des Moines. Much like the earlier fears during freeway construction, the committee feared that the relocation of African Americans in the urban renewal areas would create new ghettoes. However, in February 1966 the Des Moines City Council voted down strengthening the city housing ordinance. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held a meeting on January 25, 1966, and lambasted the city council for not acting.[23]

However, Representative Neal Smith delivered. On February 15, 1966, the federal government approved the five million dollar loan needed for the Oakridge plan. Nevertheless, Smith said, "the balance of the project will be paid by the federal government and by the sale of cleared land to redevelopers.... Although this area is primarily a residential district, it does lie close to the central business district and land will be made available for related uses and for expansion of Iowa Methodist Hospital." With Smith's statement, it is obvious that plans for the Oakridge project had been determined before public participation as hoped for by Morris. However, for Morris, and the DMCHRJD the importance of

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[22] Ibid., 2 December 1965.
[23] Ibid., 16 December 1965; 31 January 1966.

improving the African American enclave was the important issue. The DMCHRJD still supported the project after the comments by Smith, which in the end became reality on Center Street. The only obstacle to the project sat with the Des Moines City Council members who could stop the project if they did not sign the contract in thirty days.[24]

A week later in another editorial in the Bystander, Morris spelled out his frustration with the on-again-off-again Oakridge project. "The Oakridge project has been a source of a great deal of dissatisfaction upon the part of the people in the area because they have been left dangling in the air uncertain what, if anything, to do with their property or what move to make." Delays and changed hearts frustrated both the residence in the area, and the leaders who represented them. To Morris it seemed, "too much time has been wasted already."[25]

By March 3, 1966, the city council had set a date for a vote on the Oakridge project, and asked the Urban Renewal Board for a recommendation. It is also on March 3 that the editors of the Des Moines Tribune dedicated their photo page to the Oakridge plan. The feature by James Rissor explained that Center Street and the surrounding area consisted of taverns, dilapidated houses, and apartments. With the Tribune behind the project, one week later the Urban Renewal Board voted 5-1 in favor of the plan. On March 17, the city council approved the project. The project passed 4-1 with councilman Jens Grothe casting the only negative vote. Grothe worried that the development would displace many African American families, who, in turn, would find nowhere to live. He favored a plan that would rehabilitate the neighborhood. Grothe blamed people of influence in the community who pressured those in authority to add fifty acres to the plan. Grothe further stated that those that applied the

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[24] Ibid., 17 February 1966.
[25] Ibid., 24 February 1966.

most pressure and wanted a demolition project "came from Iowa Methodist Hospital, which wants to buy about two square blocks in the area." Furthermore, Grothe said, "the owners have refused to sell to the hospital, indicating... that they oppose the project."[26]

Some of the Center Street business owners were against the project. Mel Harper who leased both of the musical venues at the Billiken was against the plan. Harper believed the city had its own agenda to redevelop the land. He remembered attending meetings, and plans being discussed, but in the end the city did what it wanted to do. Hobart DePatten also agreed with Harper regarding the city and the redevelopment of Center Street. Even Morris, editor of the Bystander, had reservations about the plan. Morris worried that housing would not be available for all those dispossessed. He feared that owners of larger houses in the neighborhood would turn them into smaller apartments, and increase the size of the inner city. He also lamented the failure of an earlier attempt at low rent housing due to the real estate lobby. Furthermore, Morris feared that "many will be disappointed that they will not be able to buy another house with what they receive for the old one." However, in the end Morris believed that African Americans had received fair treatment. Morris also proved to be prophetic. Many African Americans relocated to rental properties north of University Avenue to the Des Moines River and generally west of Second Avenue to Drake University. He also predicted that many of the larger houses located on Harding Road (Martin Luther King Parkway), and older Victorian houses located near the Des Moines River would end up divided into apartments. By 1967 the Des Moines Tribune would also prove Morris right, by

[26] Ibid., 3 March 1966, 10 March 1966, 17 March 1966. Des Moines Tribune, 3 March 1966.

printing a map showing most African Americans displaced by the destruction of Center Street had moved north of University Avenue.[27]

By mid-April 1966, many of the issues that arose during the freeway construction in 1959 resurfaced again. Morris warned homeowners to accept only the previous assessments of their property. The tax appraisals occurred four years earlier in 1962, while the first appraisals by the Urban Renewal Board happened in 1964. With the on-again-off again project many home values had dropped while the property grew more valuable. Morris stressed that homeowners check their appraisals, against the new reappraisals, "so that any loss in value will not be charged when the city purchases the property. Unfortunately, confusion by residents on home repairs due to the city's change of heart helped to lower values of homes in the area, and in the process built resentment among African American homeowners in the neighborhood.[28]

On May 22 and June 2 of 1966 the editors of the Bystander reminded the community about an important meeting concerning the future of the Oakridge project. The meeting, held on June 5, 1966, and sponsored by the NAACP, the Urban Renewal Board, and the Human Rights Commission, agreed to answer questions and take comments from people living in the area.[29]

At the meeting many of the complaints similar to those from late 1950s about the freeway resurfaced. According to a Bystander reporter most of the "criticism focused on the methods...of home appraisals." Residents were upset with low prices offered for their

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[27] Mel Harper personal interview with the author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 11 November 2002; E. Hobart DePatten personal interview with the author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 29 October 2001; Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 24 March 1966; Des Moines Tribune, 24 May 1967.

[28] Iowa Bystander, (Des Moines), 14 April 1966.

[29] Ibid., 26 May 1966, 2 June 1966.

houses and higher prices asked when they wanted to relocate to a new neighborhood. While on the other hand some people urged residents to sit tight and not to panic.[30]

With the impending doom to Center Street, many African American entrepreneurs took the opportunity to open new businesses on University Avenue. From 1966, to 1970, many businesses sprouted up between Sixth Avenue and Keo Way on University. Just between Sixth Avenue and Twelfth Street alone nearly forty businesses and apartments found new homes on University by 1970.[31]

By July 7, 1966, the executive director of the Urban Renewal Board, Max W. Krumrey wrote an open letter in the Bystander. Krumrey informed the public that after many months of planning that it was time for action. He asked residents that needed help in the rehabilitation areas to call the Urban Renewal Office. Krumrey pointed out that the board would set up a new office to handle "counseling services in architecture, landscaping, construction, financing, and other related subjects. Two weeks later, the City Council approved the purchase of a three-story apartment located at 1180 11th street for use as the office. [32]

Much of what Morris had feared about reappraisals had come true. Many residents of the Oakridge area complained about lower assessments. In fact, Lawyer J. B. Morris Jr., son of the Bystander editor, represented many of the affected people at a meeting with the Urban Renewal Board. At the July 28, 1966, meeting, Morris Jr. charged the Urban Renewal Board with reneging on promises to find "ghetto-less" housing. The board officials replied it was the city's duty to place people in safe decent housing wherever the location. Edwin

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[30] Ibid., 9 June 1966
[31] R. L. Polk City Directory (Kansas City, Missouri: R. L. Polk, 1970) 390.
[32] Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 7 July 1966, 21 July 1966

Emerson, relocation director, and Max Krumrey, director of urban renewal, explained that the Urban Renewal Board had not denied housing to anyone. Emerson explained that he had "the local 'multiple listing,' a real estate industry compilation of available houses. Yet, Morris Jr. pointed out, "In the first place, we are extremely apprehensive of the people who call your office and list houses for sale because in 90 per cent of the cases the houses are dogs they want to foist upon the Negro population because they are in quote, 'rapidly changing neighborhoods.'"[33]

It is also interesting to note that in that 1966 meeting the Urban Renewal Board told those assembled that when the city cleared the land the municipality planned to use it for "medical type facilities, commercial uses, and apartments." This supported the arguments of Narcisse, DePatten, and Harper, that as early as 1966 the city had plans for the area, and it carried out those plans. For all the arguments about citizen involvement in the decision making process it is apparent that the city leaders had already made up their mind.[34]

In late August of 1966, due to calls for more housing the Des Moines City Council voted to place the "Two Rivers Low Rent Housing Project" on the November ballot. The project consisted of "600 low-rent units and 250 units of rehabilitated and leased housing." Originally rejected by voters in 1961, city leaders hoped that this time the issue would pass. Wendell Gibson from the Des Moines Low Rent Housing Agency felt secure enough in the issue to proclaim, "real estate people have not voiced any opposition to this project." However, by the middle of September, the real estate board of the Chamber of Commerce came out in opposition to the plan.[35]

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[33] Ibid., 4 August 1966
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 25 August 1966, 15 September 1966.

The action of the realtors did not surprise Bystander editor J. B. Morris, who lambasted the group in the pages his newspaper. No one "who knows the antics of many individual members of the group is surprised at this action," he wrote. "First, they look at it as a Negro project when in fact it would serve the low income group of both races." Then he noted, "most members of the group have opposed selling, renting or financing property to Negroes in integrated neighborhoods." He then urged supporters to "organize and spend some money to get the message over to the favorable voters at the polls."[36]

The Bystander supported the housing project but the Greater Des Moines Board of Realtors, and the Home Builders Association of Greater Des Moines paid for a quarter page advertisement against public housing in the African American paper. In both a front-page article and in the large ad the realtors and homebuilders made it clear that a rent supplement plan was needed, not public housing. However, in the editorial section of the Bystander Morris stated strongly that he supported the measure. Nevertheless, the Des Moines Low Rent Housing Plan fell to defeat in the November election.[37]

By September 1966, the city had begun the process of buying property in the Oakridge plat. However, by March of the next year, African Americans once again felt betrayed by the process. Rozenting Hardaway representing both the Center Street Improvement Association, and the Des Moines Human Rights Commission complained that the Oakridge project was "a planned program of segregated housing, and defacto school segregation." Hardaway was incensed that most African Americans relocated north of University in an area known as Forest Hills. University Avenue bounded the area called

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[36] Ibid., 15 September 1966.
[37] Ibid., 3 November 1966, 10 November 1966.

Forest Hills on the south to Hickman Road on the north and from east to west between the River and Harding Road. Hardaway believed that "Negro home owners and businessmen in the Oakridge area are being paid 'inadequate' prices for their properties, not enough to purchase comparable housing or business property elsewhere."[38]

E. Hobart DePatten, a second generation Center Street businessman, certainly agreed with Hardaway and observed those changing times. His father, Robert Patten, owned the print shop on Center Street. Patten instilled in his son the importance of owning land. Father and son owned various properties in the Center Street neighborhood. In fact, at one time E. Hobart DePatten owned at least fifty properties in the Des Moines area. DePatten, as most small business owners on Center, believed the city took their properties from them. According to DePatten, the city bought houses cheaply in the name of urban renewal. However, if one chose not to sell his house the city used the process of eminent domain. To DePatten, the use of eminent domain resembled the way the United States took land from Native Americans. The Indians were dispossessed of their land, and as far as DePatten was concerned, being dispossessed of land was the same as having land confiscated.[39]

Many of the people who lived and worked in the area felt just like DePatten and Hardaway. These feelings recorded in a book by Gaynelle Narcisse called They Took Our Piece of the Pie allowed those who had no voice a chance to speak out. Filled with the laments of many African Americans Narcisse's book recorded the belief that the city took apart the Center Street district piece by piece. Gene Jackson, a member of the Iowa Blues Hall of Fame, remembered the city taking Center Street "one piece at a time, until people

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[38] Des Moines Tribune, 8 September 1966.

[39] DePatten, personal interview. DePatten credits his father for instilling in him the importance of owning property. Even at the time of his interview DePatten owned several valuable parcels of land located in downtown Des Moines.

couldn't operate anymore." Bob White added, "I remember when Center closed. The freeway and renovation projects began to buy up the Center Street property." Albert Garrett agreed that "When Center began to disappear, I felt bad. We had some problems on Center, but we had more togetherness than problems." However, the demolition of Center Street affected DePatten the most.[40]

In an interview with Gaynelle Narcisse DePatten explained:

> When they started to take Center, they took my father's business and rooming houses. He died a broken-hearted man. When they came through Center, people really got gypped out of their property. They not only got my buildings, but I had a four-plex and a home on 14th and Center. They took them too! Two of my houses, I sold to Methodist Hospital. They at least paid better than the city. The city still owes me settlement money. I owned property on University, a couple of lots next door to the Dollar Store. They wouldn't give me a permit to construct a building. They took that by eminent domain. The spot where the social service building sits, I also owned that land. Every time I go out my back door and look at it, I GET MAD! .... Yes, I'm bitter about it all and I will be till the day I die.

Narcisse goes on to editorialize that "It's hard to understand how one man could have so much taken from him in the name of PROGRESS."[41]

Even those too young to own property on Center suffered the loss. Kalonji Saadiq (Clive DePatten), son of E. Hobart DePatten, experienced a certain pride and possessiveness while talking about Center Street. Saadiq believed that he and his brother, Hobart DePatten Jr. had built Center Street. Together with their father they had built DePatten's building. "We started out carrying little bricks and by the time it was done we were strong enough to

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[40] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 9,14,16.
[41] Ibid., 11.

carry a bag of concrete on each shoulder." Saadiq felt that he learned many valuable lessons working with his father on Center Street. He explained that when "they sent appraisers to Center Street; property valued at $10,000 was appraised at $3,500 to $4,000 much lower than value. If you didn't want to sell, they just condemned it." [42]

Saadiq was correct in saying that prices paid to the African American residents were much lower than the fair market value. The May 27, 1967, edition of the Tribune supported his claim. The reporter from the Tribune dug through the city assessor's rolls to find the fair market value of Oakridge property. Furthermore, the reporter compared the fair market value with the price paid and found that many property owners received much less for their property. For instance, Hobart Depatten sold three of his properties for $20,150 with a fair market value of $25,160, which equals a loss of $5,010. Yet, some critics argue that the fair market value of a property is rarely paid. Yet, this is incorrect. A 1963 booklet put out by the Urban Renewal Board clearly states, "The City will pay the 'fair market value' for each property." The pamphlet explained that two independent appraisers who were familiar with similar properties would determine that fair market value. Looking at the list it is apparent that most African American homeowners did not receive the fair market value. However, the Tribune's list clearly shows that not everyone came out equally.[43]

R. M. Hediner, a white speculator who bought tax delinquent properties, received $5, 420 above the fair market value, while lawyer and real estate investor Joseph M. Coppola, sold three properties in the Oakridge area for $15,750 dollars above the fair market value. Bertha Grund who lived at 205 Sunset Terrace, received $2,240 above the fair market value,

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[42] Ibid., 10.

[43] Des Moines Tribune, 24 May 1967; Answers to Your Questions on Urban Renewal (Des Moines: Urban Renewal Board, 1963), 5.

and lawyer George West from the west side of Des Moines received $1,370 over the fair market value. Furthermore, Hediner probably had not invested any money in the property since he only had to pay delinquent taxes on the property. Hediner's property located at 1211 Center had been vacant off and on since 1957. In fact, it had been occupied only twice between 1957 and 1966. Consequently his property, probably was not worth the $5,000 over the fair market value. Furthermore, most of these people were not African American and none of them lived on Center Street. However, the big loser was Brotherhood Inc. Their building, which was barely seven years old sold for $43,000, or $50,360 below the fair market value. It is also interesting to note that the city purchased most businesses on Center Street under the fair market value. Apartment owners were the hardest hit. The city paid Depatten, L. H. Fowler, and four other owners a combined $29,500 less than the market value.[44]

The Tribune unfortunately did not divide their investigation by race, but did find the percentage of individuals paid below fair market value. The city paid 64 percent of the residents living in the renewal area below the fair market value. However, according to urban renewal officials the assessors list that the Tribune used came from 1962, and it no longer reflected the true value of the property in the mid-1960s.[45]

Regardless of the assessments, African Americans believed that Center Street was worth much more while white Des Moines thought differently. As reported by James Risser of the Des Moines Tribune, Center Street and the surrounding area were in disrepair that consisted of taverns and dilapidated houses and apartments. A quick look through the 1967

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[44] Des Moines Tribune, 24 May 1967; R. L. Polk City Directory, (Kansas City, Missouri: R. L. Polk, 1967), 232.

[45] Des Moines Tribune, 24, May 1967

R. L. Polk City Directory lists the following businesses that existed on Center Street between Keo Way, and the 1400 block of Center Street: Marie's Pizza, The Nip Tavern, Hardaway Tonsorial Parlor Barber, The Collins Club, and several vacant buildings mostly on the north side of the street. Big D Lounge, Doc's Bar-B-Q, De Luxe Shine Parlor, A C Alvin Dental Supplies and Equipment, Bell and Hobert Pharmacy, Juniors Café, Mort's Barber Shop, Evalon Beauty shop, Gray brothers Barber shop, Mildred's beauty salon, Oakridge Neighborhood opportunity center, Pan-O-Gold Baking Company, and several apartment buildings. The varied number of businesses shows that there were more than taverns located on the street. Of the sixteen businesses listed in the directory, thirteen were not taverns. In fact, barber shops and beauty salons out numbered bars five to three. While white Des Moines saw blight, many African Americans saw opportunity, and a sense of place.[46]

Pictures of several buildings scheduled for destruction appeared in Risser's article. DePatten owned two of the buildings, one a Launderette and the other an apartment building on the northeast corner of Fourteenth and Center Street. It is impossible to tell from the photographs the condition of the apartments. According to DePatten, they were not rundown. He stated that his average tenant stayed eight years; and, as a landlord, he was very responsive to their needs. While this does not prove that his property was not dilapidated, it does warrant further study.[47]

White perceptions of Center Street went beyond taverns and dilapidated buildings. Drake Maybry, a reporter for the Register during that era, recalled the white community thought little about Center Street. If they did think about Center, it was generally concerning

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[46] Ibid., 3 March 1966; R. L. Polk City Directory, 232.
[47] Des Moines Tribune, 3 March 1966; DePatten, personal interview.

crime. Maybry recollected that people thought it was not safe to go up on Center Street after nine at night. However, Maybry and fellow reporter James Flansburg believed differently. Maybry wrote mostly about the freeway, while Flansburg wrote about urban renewal. Both reporters filed stories in support of the residents of Center Street. They also liked to visit Center Street to hear the great jazz, and blues at the Billiken.[48]

Maybry and Flansburg were not alone in their assessment of Center Street. Many white musicians worked the nightclubs on Center. "Chicago" Rick Lussie played the clubs from 1962 until 1969. He worked as a schoolteacher by day and a bluesman by night. Eventually he became Superintendent of Special Education for the Des Moines Public Schools. He played guitar for the Soul Brothers, but he also backed up many other blues musicians. Lussie believed that as long as you "kept your nose clean" you would stay out of trouble. He also agreed with Maybry that white Des Moines did not care what happened on Center Street. Also joining Lussie on the strip were other white musicians such as Sam Salamone, Don Archer, and Ed Leeper to name a few.[49]

In contrast to white Des Moines, African Americans felt safe on Center Street. Effie Phillips, who worked at both the Nip and later at the Collins Club, stated, "You didn't worry about getting your purse snatched! I would walk home late at night all the way to 17th and Center from 10th. I never worried or had a thought about anyone bothering me." She also pointed out that "we had our prostitutes and pimps but they wasn't trouble to others."[50]

Gene Jackson, who played with Lussie in the Soul Brothers, recalled that older people "looked out for the younger people." Additionally, many people recalled that the Grey

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[48] Drake Maybry, telephone interview by author, Des Moines, 14 December 2001.
[49] Rick Lussie, personal interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 14 December 2001.
[50] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 12.

brothers who ran the Sepia Club personally made sure that underage patrons were escorted safely from the bar usually by their angered and embarrassed parents.[51]

Bob White recollected, "wives, mothers, and the elderly could walk up and down Center without being afraid. People demanded respect for them." He also knew that prostitution was on Center, but it was not like Sixth Avenue. "They didn't walk up and down the street; people went inside or had to know where to go." John Long agreed with White, "everything wasn't perfect. We had a few pimps. We even had a few troublemakers. They usually used their fists, not guns like they use today. Center provided a lot for the people; it kept them out of trouble." [52]

Regardless of the feelings of the neighborhood, life on Center Street was ending. Many of the residents of the neighborhood, much like the earlier urban renewal refugees, moved into the next vicinity designated for improvement. The Des Moines Tribune pointed out that the majority of persons leaving Oakridge moved into the Forest Hills area, and into the new Model Cities project.[53]

However, in contrast to the recollections of the people who worked or played on Center Street, the people on the Model Cites Board considered the surrounding area to be a blighted area. The Model Cities area included the area formally known as Forest Hills. The people of the Forest Hills neighborhood comprised the Model City Board and decisions by the board would reflect the community. In fact, Tom Urban, the Mayor of Des Moines in 1969 remarked that the Model Cities Board "is almost a revolution in decision-making. We used to survey an area and decide what to do. Now the area people and not the institutions

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[51] Ibid., 14, 16, 17, 21.
[52] Ibid., 16, 21.
[53] Des Moines Tribune, 24 May 1967.

are the critical decision-makers." Nonetheless, the Bystander lamented the fact that participation in the project was low. During the Model Cities election many people ran unopposed. While the opportunity to be a part of the process existed, it is possible that many people believed that there was little they could do to change the process.[54]

There were also many critics of the Model City planners. Morris criticized the board for its plan to build a housing project between Twelfth and Thirteenth and University. This area according to Morris was a high crime area. Mel Harper in a 2002 interview recalled that Poor Boys, a 400-seat after-hours-club was located at that spot. Certainly, Morris believed that the area was unsuitable for public housing. He felt that the club would not leave, "they will not move because a housing project is built there." Another issue that bothered the editor of the Bystander was the construction of a hotel on Sixth Avenue. Morris questioned the new Holiday Inn. He feared that it would become a "Negro hotel." His fears proved to be unfounded since the Holiday Inn became a success story in the city with its revolving dining room located at the top of the building. Nevertheless, it did bring up another issue that other critics of Model Cities had with the program. Gaynelle Narcisse believed that money not used by the Model Cities Board was used elsewhere. She believed that the city benefited from money not used by the board and that projects located elsewhere benefited from the money earmarked for the inner city.[55]

However, the presidential election in 1968 slowed down that change. Many urban renewal plans ended up on hold until after the election of Richard Nixon. Richard Nixon, a

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[54] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 27 March 1969, 7 November 1968.

[55] Iowa Bystander, (Des Moines), 25 September 1969; Harper, personal interview; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, November 4, 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa.

Republican, was a sharp contrast to Democrat Lyndon Johnson. Many people feared that the Republican Party would cut funding for urban renewal. Des Moines Model Cities and Oakridge projects languished until April 1969, when the Nixon administration approved funding for the programs. The city of Des Moines then submitted its proposal to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for approval.[56]

By the summer of 1969, the Bystander was advertising new clubs. With the impending demise of Center Street African Americans needed new nightspots. The New Orleans Club located downtown and the Cornet Lounge on Keo Way, received constant advertising over the summer. While the Bystander now covered the new lounges, reports concerning the end of the legendary clubs of Center did not exist.[57]

Instead, the Bystander reported the crack down on "after-hour-joints." On August 28, 1969, the Des Moines Police Department made a sweep of "after-hour-clubs" in the Des Moines area. Using an undercover agent, the Des Moines police were able to purchase liquor, and narcotics at the residences of twenty-nine people. The Model Cities Board, which believed that the neighborhood had been overrun with vice, spurred the police to crack down on the violators. The police arrested the majority of people for alcohol violations but not all of the arrests were in the inner city.[58]

Unlike the narcotic arrests, the apprehensions for alcohol were mostly at small after-hour-clubs that had been a Des Moines tradition for many years. After-hour-clubs were much like the celebrated fish fries or rent parties that African Americans frequently held. These parties were occasions for African Americans to gather at people's houses and help

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[56] Iowa Bystander, (Des Moines), 10 April 1969.
[57] Ibid., 17 July 1969.
[58] Ibid., 28 August 1969.

raise money to pay their rent. These parties would usually have a solo musician or a band. In Des Moines, these clubs gained added importance in the early Sixties when legislation for the sale of liquor-by-the-drink passed. The new law called for strict enforcement of the 2:00 A.M. closing time. This meant that people who had enjoyed music into the early hours needed to find new venues. Lucille Black remembered, "We went to the 790 and others, but a lot of the time we went to after-hours places because Dudley (Black) played in the band and it was late when he finished. As a matter of fact, Eddie Eugene... was in the same band as Dudley. Some of the others were Johnny Clinton (guitar), Mrs. Dysart (Piano) Lauren Butler, H. Bowman (sax), Eddie Barber (trombone), George Fletcher (drums), and Dudley played bass fiddle." Jimmy Pryor, Des Moines legendary blues singer came to the city because of these clubs. According to Pryor, Des Moines was "a twenty-four seven type of town" and the after-hours-joints provided musicians with much needed extra income.[59]

By September 4, 1969, the number of people arrested for running after-hour-joints or bootlegging establishments had increased to thirty-five. Nonetheless, the Bystander's editor complained that within three days of the first arrests the clubs had reopened. While Police Chief Wendell Nichols promised more arrests, the Bystander admitted that most of the evidence was "shaky," and that most of those arrested would go free.[60]

Mel Harper owner of the 790 Club also was one of the many people arrested for running an after-hour joint. According to Harper, the evidence was very weak. At his trial, the undercover officer told the jury that the doorman allowed him in the club. However,

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[59] Narcisse, They Took Our Piece of the Pie!, 10. For more on rent parties see, Leroi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: Quill Publishing 1999).

[60] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 4 September 1969, 2 October 1969.

Harper proved that the doorman in question worked at the Wakonda Club that night. Furthermore, when the officer presented a very small vial of liquor to the jury, Harper's attorney asked him how he got the booze in the little bottle. When the undercover officer exclaimed that he spit it in the bottle the jury erupted in laughter, and the judge declared Harper innocent.[61]

On October 16, 1969, Des Moines was awarded two millions dollars for the Model Cities Project. The Bystander expected that within a week bulldozers to demolish the buildings on Center Street would arrive. This marked the end of the Center Street business district. After seventy years as a thriving African American business community, Center Street fell to the relentless onslaught of urban renewal.

It is ironic that the Bystander did not note the passing of the African American business district. Not one word on the Sepia, the Billiken, or the 790 Club. No lament for the great past or the wonderful musicians. No words of mourning for a passing age. An age in which Booker T. Washington's vision of self-reliant businessmen was being replaced with an age of government subsidized housing and expanded parking for Methodist Hospital. No talk of DePatten's Launderette or of the many barbershops and beauty shops. No mention of the great restaurants. No fond remembrances of the boarding houses where the greatest African American entertainers, sportsmen, and politicians stayed. It is also ironic that the Bystander would end the month of October with a profile of the great bluesman Leadbelly, while its own bluesmen were scrambling to find new places to play.[62]

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[61] Harper, personal interview.

[62] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 16 October 1969, 30 October 1969. For more on Booker T. Washington's influence on Center Street see, Jack Lufkin "Black Des Moines."

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the city tried to improve the former Center Street neighborhood. In 1969 Tribune reporter Carroll Kraus touted the new Homes of Oakridge. The housing project that Bystander editor, Morris had written about in 1959 was now becoming a reality. The article explained that the project would house people of different incomes. Of the 300 units, half were set aside for moderate-income families. Also in 1969, the Urban Renewal Board proposed a shopping center to replace the black businesses displaced by the destruction of Center Street. The plan proposed by Matthew Burksbaum of General Management Corp. and the United Black Federation called for a "supermarket, drugstore, barber and beauty shops, a cleaning shop and possibly some clothing and soft-goods stores." The United Black Federation went so far as to put a deposit on the land. The shopping center however failed to materialize. Max Krumrey returned the deposit to the United Black Federation. Krumrey felt that the proposal submitted "was not complete and there has been little progress on the plans in the past two months." Hobart DePatten believed that the city had changed its mind about letting an African American business operate in the neighborhood. However, part of the problem had to do with a future tenant. Paris Williams who would have been the grocer wanted to open earlier than the planed shopping center. He secured a loan from American Republic Insurance Co. and bought land next to the future project of the United Black Federation. Williams plan called for the grocery on the above floors with retail shops below. Williams project eventually was accepted, and ground breaking took place on December 14, 1970. However, the store closed after one year of operation.[63]

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[63] The Iowa Bystander (Des Moines), 4 December 1969; Des Moines Tribune, 14 July 1970; Des Moines Register 4 December 1970; Return to Center Street Oral History Project, November 4, 2002, cassette tape, State Historical Society of Iowa.

The sprit of Center Street died quietly that October day in 1969, and with it went the memories of many people. E. Hobart DePatten, who of all the businessmen on Center was hurt the most, refused to even remember the tearing down of his buildings. "I have a mental block," he said, when asked to describe the destruction of Center. He could not remember, or refused to recall its fall. As he said, "I have blocked it all out together."[64]

However, when asked if he thought businesses could have survived on Center Street he replied, "They still are!" It is true, today on Center businesses such as medical offices, doctor's offices, and communication businesses thrive. In addition, the Homes of Oakridge a public housing effort replaced the apartment buildings owned by DePatten and other African American businessmen. In some ways, Center really has not changed. What changed were the black businesses that catered to the needs of the African American community. Doctor's offices, parking lots, and the Homes of Oakridge replaced them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Center Street was, in essence, a manifestation of Booker T. Washington's vision of self-reliant African American businessmen providing blacks with goods and services. One hundred years later, that vision disappeared from Center Street. Attempts during the 1970s to relocate African American business to University Avenue failed; those businesses eventually end up torn down or replaced by urban renewal. The dreams of the past may have died on Center, but the memories remain for those left behind.

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[64] DePatten, personal interview.

Conclusion

From its beginning Center Street was an area designated for African Americans. Forced to live there due to segregation, African Americans built a business district to help supply their economic needs. This segregation made Center Street more than a street. It developed a sense of place that African Americans could proudly call their own. However, many African Americans experienced extreme personal loss when the street disappeared due to the freeway and urban renewal.

The earliest inhabitants of Calamity Creek could never imagine the dramatic change of their neighborhood. From the flood control work in 1895 to the beginning of the new century Center Street slowly grew. African Americans inspired by Booker T. Washington built themselves a place of their own. Not just businesses, but homes, churches, and social gathering spots. These buildings gave African Americans a sense of place and pride.

Segregation also played a role in the growth of Center Street. Real estate agents redlined areas of Des Moines and forced African Americans to cluster into black neighborhoods. Furthermore, during the 1930s city and state leaders feared that blacks moving from the redlined areas into neighboring districts would harm the city. These fears continued into the 1960s.

Yet, during that time certain aspects of African American culture began to take root in the larger culture. Blues and jazz music blossomed between the 1920s and 1950s, but African American performers who played in white venues in Des Moines still faced the Jim Crow practices of accommodations. These musicians found that they could not spend the

night in white hotels and had to sleep in boarding houses located on Center Street. This, in turn, helped to create the great music scene on Center. Musicians such as Louie Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway played for white audiences during the early evening and black audiences from late in the evening until the sun rose the next day.

Center Street reached its peak in the late 1950s. Businesses thrived and stability reigned. Some of the entrepreneurs lasted more than thirty years in the same location. However, social and political turmoil began to take its toil. The decline of Center Street started in 1957. In that year, the city and the freeway commission announced plans for the demolition of Center for an expressway and urban renewal. Those twin plans had a marked effect on the street. The 1958 R. L. Polk City Directory clearly shows the early movement of many people off Center Street. Once the freeway commission shifted the interstate north, the Center Street business district stabilized, but the people who lived north of the street now faced the fight to save their homes.[1]

Throughout 1959 homeowners in the way of the freeway fought the Highway Commission for adequate payment for their homes. The National Association for the Advancement of Color People, the Des Moines Human Rights Commission, and many church groups fought the Highway Commission unsuccessfully for satisfactory compensation. Forced by low payments and segregated housing, those African Americans in the line of the freeway had no choice but to move into other black areas or into fringe neighborhoods.

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[1] Des Moines Register, 5 March 1957, Urban Renewal, clipping file, State Historical Society of Iowa; R. L. Polk City Directory (Kansas City, Missouri: R. L. Polk, 1958), 204-05. Enumeration occurred in 1957 for the 1958 directory.

From 1961 through 1963, Center Street received increasing pressure from the influx of African Americans displaced by the River Hills urban renewal project. These people ousted by River Hills confronted the same segregation that families driven from the freeway faced. Segregation caused by redlining forced African Americans to live in the Center Street area. The city and the Urban Renewal Board offered Cleveland Park as a suitable location, but the industrial and dilapidated neighborhood did not appeal to either group and, in the end, Cleveland Park languished until the early 1970s. Moreover, the low payments for property forced these people to buy inadequate housing. Many of the people in both the freeway and River Hills areas found themselves taking a step backwards.

From 1957 to 1961, the Oakridge urban renewal plan added more pressure to Center Street. The plans shifted from partial demolition to total demolition of the business district. This kept vacancy rates higher than in the 1950s.[2]

Even with the cancellation of the Oakridge project in 1961, the Center Street business district was still was not safe. The Build a Better America Committee recommended the raising of Center Street, but stopping the Oakridge project. It is apparent from the R. L. Polk City Directory that from 1961 to 1966 more and more businesses and homes became vacant. When the city began to buy houses and businesses on Center Street, the same arguments from the freeway and River Hills returned. Once again, the city paid people below the fair market value of homes in the area. When the residents complained the Urban Renewal Board told them that their property values had dropped from the tax assessments of 1962. Unfortunately, for those who lived in the area the confusion of the on-again-off-again urban

[2] R. L. Polk City Directory, 1957-61.

renewal plans caused many people to stop fixing their homes, which, in the end, lowered the values of their residences.[3]

Once again, faced with low payments many African Americans moved north into the new urban renewal area called the Model Cities and into the path of a new proposed freeway, the north-south freeway. One more time, the area faced the turmoil of changing urban renewal plans and proposed freeways that continued into 1990s.

On a personal level Hobart DePatten and Mel Harper both experienced the sting of multiple urban renewal efforts, and their feelings represented those of many who lived in that area. DePatten, who built his Launderette by hand with his sons, Hobart and Clive (Kalongi Saadiq) DePatten, lost his house, his father's house, and his business to urban renewal. He received money for all three of his properties, but $5,010 below the fair market value. He, like many African American businessmen, moved to University Avenue. However, he lost those properties to the city by eminent domain.[4]

Mel Harper also felt the sting of urban renewal. His famous club located in the Billiken fell to the wrecking ball in 1969. He moved to University Avenue and opened up Robert's Lounge. Harper complained that from the beginning the police and the media tried to close his club. He said that any time a crime happened within a few blocks of his nightclub the local media appeared to shoot film outside his bar. In the mid-1980s, Roberts Lounge closed due to urban renewal, and Corinthian Gardens replaced the club. Harper

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[3] Ibid., 1961-1966.

[4] E. Hobart DePatten, interview by author, cassette tape, Des Moines, 29 October 2001.

finally found a home when he moved to West Des Moines and opened Mel's on Ashworth Road.[5]

The resentment of these men and women displaced from Center Street accurately reflected the viewpoints of many of the African Americans who live in Des Moines today. Center Street was where they were free from segregation and Jim Crow. Center Street was their place, their home. Center Street was where they played and sang because this truly was their piece of the pie.

[5] Melvin Harper, interview by author, cassette tape, West Des Moines, 11 November 2002

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